

The Battle of Sigma Octanus IV

by ilmiopassato

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Summary: COMPLETE. Fresh out of the hospital, Lt. Natalie Cooper returns to battle on planet Heath. When Cooper's unit is later transferred to Sigma Octanus IV for a break from the frontlines, the Covenant invasion begins.

1. Intro: Just Been Released

Author's Note: Well, here goes my 6th Halo fanfic on this site (my former pen name was Ensign Pettis). As usual, I DO NOT OWN HALO/2/3 OR ANY OF THE BOOKS. I'm just writing a fanfic based off the Halo universe (but my characters are my own, except for Colonel James Ackerson).

Also note that although this is the story of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV, it does not follow the descriptions of the planet or the battle as mentioned in Halo: The Fall of Reach by Eric Nylund. So expect it to be different than the book version (my version doesn't even take place in the same month).

Rating is T for language, violence, blood, gore, and some suggestive/sexual content later on (not graphic). The story may go back up to rated M in the future.

Hope you enjoy and please R&R. Peace!

* * *

>Intro: Just Been Released**

WARNING! TOP SECRET! EYES ONLY!

SCANNING IN PROGRESSâ€|

â€|CLEARANCE GRANTED

//TO: Captain Jeremy Kingston, Commanding Officer Bravo Company,

102nd Force Action Battalion, 603rd Special Infantry Regiment, UNSC Marine Corps

FROM: Lieutenant Colonel Sandra Damion, Commanding Officer/Lead Physician 41st Orbital Field Hospital, UNSC Marine Corps

SUBJECT: FILE ENCRYPTED

MESSAGE:

Captain Kingston,

You have a new kid to integrate into your company, straight from the 41st Orbital Field Hospital stationed in Heath space. Patient's come back from a hefty plasma wound that boiled away the back armor plate and gave the patient 11 percent full thickness burns...regions affected include the lower lumbar to the mid-thoracic...spleen was compromised and had to be removed...minor trauma to the kidneys, etc. You'll see the complete history in the medical file. For a young Marine, it's quite the document. You can also find a brief bio here: Click link for First Lieutenant N. Cooper CSV.

This Marine's a tough fighter, Captain. Former CO says the lieutenant's got a hell of a temper, too. Use it wisely.

Lt. Col. Sandra T. Damion, 41st Orbital Field Hospital

//END MESSAGE//

2. Chapter 1: So Here We Go Again

****Chapter One: So Here We Go Again****

****0430 Hours, January 14, 2552. Outskirts of Reatan Desert, New Africa. "The Desert Campaign," Planet Heath. Prologue to Battle of Sigma Octanus IV****

The ride from the 41st Orbital Field Hospital to dirt wasn't rough at all. What really hit me was the truck drive to my new assigned base; the corporal manning the Warthog desert jeep either had no license or was seriously wasted. Based on my experiences in the military, either option was equally viable. I kept my back pain to myself until we hit an especially large pothole in the dusty road. I fell back into my seat hard, and my recently healed wounds definitely did not appreciate the treatment.

New unit meant new beginnings. I didn't want my new subordinates to think I was weak or soft, so I bit my lip hard to keep from yelping. In the meantime, I kept my trigger finger outside of the guard on my rifle; one more painful pothole and this Marine was going to be history.

Calm, I told myself. _I am the poster child of calm_.

It's so much easier to be calm when your back hasn't been burned off.

If it hadn't been for the timely interventions of my platoon's medic, I'd have bought the farm on the other, more lush side of Heath. While

that was certainly better than dying in the middle of a desert, I preferred to be alive in both instances. I still marveled sometimes at how I could have possibly survived an overcharged plasma shot square in the back; I only wish the rest of my platoon could have been as lucky.

Here's the tragic part: after I was medevaced from the battle, my entire platoon was destroyed in a consequent attack. I was the sole survivor, and only because I'd spent half of that fateful battle in an ICU ward. My buddies, _my Marines_, were all dead. And I vowed I'd never abandon my boys again, no matter how many full thickness burns I had to endure, no matter how many spleens I had to go through. We'd win this desert battle or we'd fight and die trying. Together.

This incompetent driver, however, was making me think very differently so far about my new bunch of Marines. Who had been their leader? And why the hell was this leader so lacking in disciplinary skills? Looks like I'd have to whip these men into shape.

Bump.

"Sorry 'bout that, ma'am. This Warthog's a little outdated 'cause it was the only one available. All the others are fightin' the Covies as we speak, shreddin' those aliens with that baby back there," Corporal Dandh explained, pointing back at the jeep's mounted machine gun. At least the young Marine manning the thirty cal seemed like a good enough soldier. I was afraid Corporal Dandh had not gone through the same rigorous training I hadâ€|and I wondered how he'd become a Marine at all.

"Yes, ma'am, Trevor's right. Just yesterday I blew right through a Ghost with this MG." The younger Marine grinned. "Killed an Elite, Lieutenant. My very first one."

I looked into his young face, smiling with pride. All I could think about in that moment were the bloody bodies I'd seen in combat, wearing his same face. I frowned and said nothing.

"What's a matter, El-Tee? You too tough to laugh?" Corporal Dandh asked.

I was starting to dislike Dandh, and that was not a good sign.

"Yeah," I answered in complete seriousness.

The corporal looked at me and scoffed like he didn't believe it. The young private, however, had his wits about him and straightened.

"I meant no offense, Lieutenant," the private said quietly. "You lose somebody?"

This intrigued me; the kid was too green to be so intuitive.

"What makes you think so, Private?" I inquired.

"I dunno. It's justâ€|I've seen the way the combat vets look after battlesâ€|just so weary. They don't get much too excited about kills like I do."

I smiled slightly. "It may not surprise you to learn that I have lost people, kid." After all, the Covenant had done away with quite a few members of my family already. I didn't elaborate, however.

"Really?" the private asked.

"How long have you been fightin', exactly?" Corporal Dandh said, looking skeptical.

"Four years, Corporal. Going on five. I've been wounded once, I've fought on two different planets, and I've seen my fair share of close calls and more dead messed up bodies than I'd ever care to see."

Dandh shut up quick after that.

"I uh, I heard your platoon ate it, Lieutenant," Private Beesner said suddenly.

"Oh, shit, here comes the party smashers!" Dandh suddenly made a hard left turn to avoid a plasma shot coming straight for us. I grabbed my seat with white knuckles to keep from being tossed from the old jeep.

"This your baptism of fire, Lieutenant?" Dandh shouted at me as he sped through the hail of fire that had begun raining down on us. He'd seen my grip on the Warthog's sides.

"How the hell do you think I had my back charbroiled? I wasn't sitting behind a fucking desk, I can tell you that much!" I screamed back. I was pissed that he'd question me like this, especially after I'd told him of my previous exploits.

The volume of highly-charged plasma rounds being launched at our jeep was increasing exponentially.

"Kill the engine, Corporal," I ordered Dandh. Instead of obeying like he should have, he looked at me like I was insane.

"What do you mean?"

"I said kill the engine! You wanna listen to me or do you want to become a well-done steak?"

Corporal Dandh braked with such force we almost both flew through the windshield.

"Down! Get down!" I shouted at Dandh. "Beesner, open up!"

"Y-yes, ma'am!" the young private yelled.

The loud rattling sound of a thirty-caliber machine gun enveloped my ears.

Welcome back, Lieutenant Cooper, it seemed to say.

"We're pinned here, Lieutenant!" Dandh cried from underneath the Warthog. I crouched low in the driver's seat, using the metal bar separating the two front seats as cover while I searched for targets.

I checked my rifle's safety, aimed, and let off a burst of automatic weapon's fire. There was a hoard of Covenant coming towards our Warthog, complete with a Ghost. This wasn't going to end well if I couldn't figure something out—and fast.

"Bee! You got a rocket launcher back there?" I asked the private.

"Yeah!" he shouted through a long burst of machine gun fire.

"Dandh! You better grab the SPNKR and take care of that Ghost."

"You gotta be shittin' me!" Dandh called back. "I wanna keep my head!"

"Coward," I muttered under my breath. "At least fire your rifle, Corporal!"

I jumped down to the dirt and crouched along the side of the Warthog, trying not to notice the black puffs of roasted ground popping up all around me. I never wanted to feel the sensation of boiling plasma on my skin again.

When I made it to the back of the 'Hog, I grabbed hold of the bumper and pulled myself onto the bed of the vehicle. What with the rocket launcher, ammo, machine gun, and the young private, there wasn't exactly that much room left.

"Covering me, kid?" I asked the private above the raucous. I grabbed two tubes of rockets and the launcher before jumping back down to the ground.

"Yes, ma'am!" Beesner bellowed.

I heard the fear in his voice.

I crouched back behind the vehicle, trying to keep my temper in check while loading the launcher with the first rocket. For just the briefest of moments, I considered using the heavy weapon to ignite Corporal Dandh's ass. If we survived the engagement, I was going to hook him up with a one-way ticket to the brig for insubordination.

After what seemed like ages, the rocket was finally ready for launch. I raised the weapon to my shoulder and crept to the side of the 'Hog, searching for the speedy alien vehicle. There it was, not too many yards away, zipping by for an attack. I had to get at it before it was close enough to fire its plasma guns.

I grabbed Dandh, hiding behind the 'Hog's front tire, by his uniform's collar and pulled hard. I didn't lift him, but then that wasn't my intention; I just wanted him awake and alert.

"Listen to me, Corporal. Even if you don't give a shit about what happens to Beesner and I, at least care enough about your lousy self to give me covering fire. Now!"

Corporal Dandh looked up at me, horror stricken, but he finally lifted up his rifle and attempted to aim down the sights. Meanwhile, I set up right behind him, fixed on the flash of purple that was the

enemy Ghost, and let the first salvo go.

I jumped over Dandh as I hit the dusty ground, knowing he wouldn't react fast enough himself to get to cover. I turned back for just an instant to see Beesner's wide-eyed stare as he pounced off the bed of the jeep.

At first all I heard was the sound of crunching metal, accompanied a few seconds later by an earth-rattling explosion. I kept my head low and held onto my helmet until it was over.

Corporal Dandh screamed.

I got up off Dandh when Covenant small arms began firing again, and saw wet blood on his back; some had leaked to the front and that was why he'd yelled out. But how could any shrapnel from the blast have gotten there when I'd been shielding him the whole time?

The corporal gave me a look and stared. "You're bleeding, Lieutenant."

I didn't look down at myself; I wanted to avoid shock as long as the skirmish was still being played out. "Keep firing," I told Dandh. This time, he did exactly what I ordered without saying a word. I turned toward the back end of the Warthog, and glanced at Private Beesner. He had a look of panic on his face when he saw me (or more probably, my new mystery wound) but was otherwise fine. I quickly ordered him to scout how many more Covenant were left as I picked off some aliens with my rifle.

The volume of firing coming in was slowly dissipating by now, and it was right about then that I felt the first throbs of pain—coming from my ribs on the right side. I pressed a hand against the pain for a moment, and my hand came back wet.

I was getting light-headed.

"Patrol size, Lieutenant," Beesner announced. "And they're high-tailing it outta here. Should we finish 'em off or let 'em go?"

I still held my weapon in one hand, I heard Beesner's voice and Dandh's blasting rifle, but I couldn't respond to any of it. Tunnel—tunnel vision, that's what was happening—

—I'm never going to let my men down again—

I took a deep breath, leaned over the side of the Warthog, and spotted the Covenant running from the scene. There was no way I was letting them get away after what they'd done to my Marines. It was payback time, even if on a small scale.

"Beesner, Dandh, let's get cracking. Follow me," I said as I stood, rifle still aimed at the retreating enemy. I was going to get every last one of them.

"See that structure up ahead, Dandh?" I said as we moved from the cover of the Warthog. For several yards, we had to cross open ground, but then soon after was a small, makeshift bunker the aliens had erected from hard, packed sand. A few grenades and a rocket, and we

could bury them all alive.

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"Drop your rifle and grab a launcher and ammo, double time. Beesner and I will get to the bunker and cover fire. Nothing will touch you."

"Yes, ma'am." Corporal Dandh ran to the back of the jeep to retrieve the tube I'd dropped in the sand. Meanwhile, I turned to Beesner.

"Ready, Bee?" I asked as I finished reloading the clip in my rifle. Damn, but my head was spinningâ€|

"Yes, ma'am."

I grinned. "Then let's get to it."

We took off lightning fast, running about a football field's length to the outer walls of the alien bunker. I wondered why none of us had noticed it before; it was impossible that the Covenant had dug an entire underground system, no matter how small, in the few minutes the skirmish had lasted.

I decided going in guns blazing was not the right approach, since Dandh was still back at the Warthog setting up the rocket launcher. I relayed this to Beesner in a private COM channel through my helmet, just as we managed to get close the sand structure.

Once there, Beesner and I crouched behind the low outer wall, which was about three feet tall, and tried to peek inside the slit in the wall at ground level. There was no sound, no activity, no motion at all on my HUD's detector. It seemed to be utterly deserted, despite the fact that we'd seen the alien patrol running this way.

That was not a good sign. Something was up.

I opened a COM channel to Corporal Dandh. "Something's up, Corporal. I want you to stay behind the 'Hog, but keep your rocket trained on that slit facing you. If something so much as twitches, I want to be notified immediately. Stand by for more orders."

There was a pause and a crackle on the channel, then, "Got it, El-Tee."

I tried to think through the situation in the few seconds I had, and with my head spinning at a hundred miles per hour. The sprint had caused me to breathe hard, which in turn had put a strain on my wounded ribs. My right side still felt wet and warm.

Focus. This had to end quickly, while I could still think.

The slit had been facing the Warthog the whole time; that was probably how they'd spotted us speeding through the desert road. So they deployed a small patrol to check it out, and added a Ghost as insurance against our vehicle. When we destroyed their vehicle, the patrol was now disadvantaged, so they fled back to their small bunkerâ€|

A light bulb went on in my head.

This bunker was small and only had a patrol-sized strike force because it was an observation post. The Covenant inside could have easily dispatched a whole large detachment of their troops, or notified them of which direction we were heading in. Quite probably, they'd already done both.

Crap.

We had to get out of here fast, but first the place had to be destroyed. There was no time to reduce the bunker to ruins after investigating, however; we had to release the heavy explosives right away. I turned to Beesner, holding his rifle with white knuckles beside me.

"Kid, how many grenades do you have?" I asked him.

"Uhâ€¦" he fumbled with his web belt and glanced down. "I have two left, ma'am. I used most of 'em up on a patrol that got hairy a couple days ago."

"Plasma or frag?"

"Frag."

I nodded, then took stock of my own. Having just been released from the hospital, I had a more complete set of gear: three fragmentation grenades, four clips of ammo for my rifle, two clips of ammo for my silenced pistol, two field rations, five energy bars, two full canteens of water, etc. Still, I wasn't sure if five grenades alone could do it.

If coupled with a high explosive rocket, however, the odds just might change in our favor.

"Dandh, keep that rocket trained at the slit and stand by," I said over the radio. I waited for the corporal's acknowledgment light to wink green, then turned to Beesner. "Ready to head back, Bee?"

He gave me a look. "Ma'am?"

"We're going to start the party off with a bang first, of course," I said to him. He gave me a weak smile but said nothing.

"Stay here, and prepare to prime your grenades. I'm going up top to see who's home." I dropped my rifle in the sand beside Beesner, and gripped the top of the low outer wall. I hopped up to the top of the bunker, and wasn't surprised when I found no hole on the roof of the structure. However, that was something I could quickly remedy.

Standing atop the alien structure, sand blowing gently across my combat boots, head feeling increasingly light, and ribs continuing to painfully ooze blood, I primed two of my grenades, placed them both next to each other in the center, and rolled off the roof to cover.

Beesner understood immediately and ducked down himself; he cradled his own grenades and I prayed they wouldn't go off. I didn't want to

die, and I knew my new subordinate didn't wish it either. The three seconds it took the frags to detonate seemed like hours.

When the twin explosives finally went off, it felt as if the force of a hurricane hit my ears; if it hadn't been for my helmet's protective layer, I was sure my eardrums would have burst. We'd been way too close to the grenades I'd planted.

Beesner and I rode it out on the sandy ground, holding onto our rifles and helmets as if they were the only things keeping the world together. Finally, the artificial sandstorm ended, and as I opened my eyes, I realized I couldn't see.

Luckily, before I panicked, I decided to wipe off my helmet's visor. It seemed to have accumulated enough sand to be its own beach. Those frags had more power than I'd given them credit for. With my eyesight miraculously recovered, I pushed myself off the ground to inspect the damage.

Other than sandy and shaken, the young private escaped unscathed, I helped him to his feet and then got to the top of the bunker.

There wasn't exactly much left of it.

Once on the roof, I could hear the panicked cries of Grunts, the angry roars of Elites, and the just plain weird sounds Jackals liked to make. I got to thinking the bunker may have been larger than foreseen, but there was no time to adjust the plans. This place had to go up now, before reinforcements showed up.

"Bee, up here now, double time!" I said in a private COM channel. "You better have those grenades hot in your hands and be ready to sprint for your life."

"Got it, El-Tee!"

Within a matter of seconds, Private Beesner joined me on the roof, primed grenades in hand. Holding my own live explosive, I looked at him. I counted down three seconds silently with my gloved fingers.

Oneâ€|twoâ€|three.

We threw our grenades down the hole in the roof at the same time, but didn't wait for them to hit. Beesner and I got the hell off the roof so fast that the frags didn't detonate until a second afterward. By then, I was already sprinting across the space between the Warthog and the bunker, Beesner hot on my heels. It was hard walking when loaded down with gear, let alone sprinting, but it was amazing what you could do when you had your ass to save.

A few seconds later, when Beesner and I had reached the Warthog, a new round of incoming plasma fire began boiling through the desert air. Much to my surprise, however, Corporal Dandh maintained his composure and was still dutifully aiming the rocket launcher at the bunker slit.

"Ready when you are, Lieutenant!" he yelled over the noise of the renewed skirmish.

"Fire!" I yelled back.

Suddenly there was a loud hiss and smoke as the rocket was forced from the launcher at high speeds. Dandh, Beesner, and I watched almost in slow motion as the rocket sped toward the bunker_. This had better work_, I thought, unaware that I was holding my breath.

A cloud of dust and sand swarmed the small slit in the ground. And when it all cleared, all traces of the bunker had disappeared; a pile of debris stood in its place, and the whole structure had caved in. Served those Covies right, getting buried alive.

And then came the eerie silence that occurs when the battle is over, and all your enemies lay dead at your feet.

"Well," Dandh said, turning to look at me after a long pause, "I think it's safe to say that you're one helluva soldier, ma'am."

"Welcome to Bravo Company, El-Tee," Beesner added.

I took off my helmet and wiped the sweat off my forehead. I grinned at my new comrades, and they grinned back.

"Welcome? Yeah, right," I said.

3. Chapter 2: Hiya Captain!

****Chapter Two: Hiya Captain!****

After a relatively short drive, we'd finally made our way to the front.

"Last stop, El-Tee. Be seein' ya real soon," Corporal Dandh said to me as I got out of the Warthog.

I slung my rifle and looked around. It looked like any front I'd ever seen: tired, war-weary soldiers eating and sleeping and keeping watch. If this is what it took to make sure humanity had a future, though, it was worth it.

"Anybody know where I can find Captainâ€|" I began, the name escaping me.

"Kingston?" Beesner finished for me. I nodded, and he replied, "Company CP's less than half a klick behind the line, east."

"Thanks, Private," I said, turning in the direction he'd pointed. He'd already uploaded the map to my HUD.

"Lieutenant?" Private Beesner said as I started off. I looked back and waited. "Don't you want that looked at before you go? Our medic's right over there."

I stared down at my right side; the blood had finally dried up and I was dizzy no longer, but it still hurt like hell. "I'll be fine, Bee. It's not a deep wound and if I've made it this long, I can wait until the captain gives me my orders."

Beesner looked like he didn't buy it, but he nodded. What more could he have done? "Yes, ma'am."

The walk to the Bravo Company command post wasn't that long, but by now the sun was starting to rise over the horizon. My helmet's visor was beginning to polarize as the light grew in intensity; I'd never seen a sunrise on this side of Heath before.

With the beautiful sunrise, however, also came an unbearable heat. It was only about six in the morning, but already the desert sun began taking its toll. It seemed to defy all logic; January in the desert was supposed to be cold, barren, and covered with snow. In this hemisphere of Heath, however, it was summer—a deadly time to be in a desert, war or no war.

Oh, God. If the plasma and grenades didn't kill me, the heat would.

Before I could get thoroughly depressed, I made it to Captain Kingston's makeshift office. It wasn't hard to find, mostly because there was only one medium-sized, camouflaged tent in the middle of mounds of sand. And because of that map Beesner had given me.

I walked up to the canvas tent, lifted the flap, and stood at attention. "Sir! Lieutenant Cooper, reporting for duty!"

The man sitting behind the desk seemed like a seasoned soldier: he had brown hair that was beginning to gray, and a scar running down his left forearm. I also noticed that he wore no helmet, gloves, or jacket; instead, he wore only a T-shirt, trousers, boots, and armor plates in the usual places.

I hope he lets me strip some of my gear, I thought to myself. The hell with explosive ordnance---I wanted protection from frying in my uniform. Just from the short hike through the early morning desert, I was giving off twice my weight in sweat. And I was in peak physical shape, too.

Captain Kingston didn't look up from his papers. "At ease, kid," he said. "And you can take off your helmet."

I tried hard to remain expressionless as I took off my helmet. What a relief!

Kingston was silent as he signed a paper, then placed it on a pile to his left. Then, finally, he glanced up at me.

"Who're you, kid?" he asked me.

"Lieutenant Cooper, sir."

The captain took out a datapad and seemed to be reading for a moment. "41st Orbital Hospital?"

"Yes, sir."

"Says here you got your back barbecued. All better now?"

"Yes, sir. Fit for duty."

"Good to hear." He was still reading. "First Lieutenant Natalie McKenzie Cooper, twenty-four years old from Emerald Pines, Mars."

"Correct, sir."

"Ok, Cooper. How much of our situation down here do you know?"

I racked my brain, trying to think of the short, uninformative briefing I'd received while still in the hospital. "Well, sir, I hear you're picking up replacements for a big invasion coming up soon. Covenant base twelve klicks north of the frontline, right?"

Kingston sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Right you are, Lieutenant. Or, as it so happens, were. Things've changed now, Cooper. We found out last night that we've got a relief coming in in about five days. So, it's time to dig in, keep the area neat for the next group, and start packing our bags."

I was dumbstruck, but I tried not to let it show. Still, I had to ask. "Sir, permission to speak?"

"Granted."

"Sir, with all due respectâ€¦well, I just got here."

"I'm well aware of that, Lieutenant. Unfortunately, it's the Marine Corps and some cigar-smoking general safe in his warm bed thatâ€¦" He stopped and gave me a look; he seemed to have just realized what he'd said. He cleared his throat. "Bottom line is, Cooper, you are now a lieutenant in my company. And I'm telling you we're not staying here long."

"Yes, sir."

"So don't get too comfortable, but do get to know the men. You're with us now."

"Understood, Captain." I fiddled with my fingers behind my back. "Sir?"

"Lieutenant?"

"If I may ask, sir, where are we going next?"

"There'll be a more formal briefing, but there's no harm telling you now. It's a planet called Sigma Octanus IV. Supposed to be one of the easiest posts since the Covies don't know about it, and it's often used as a relaxed setting for soldiers who have been in the frontlines for a while." The captain leaned back in his fold out metal chair. "Even though you haven't been with us, I understand you've had a helluva time on the lines in the Heathan forest."

I struggled to maintain composureâ€¦visions of charred bodies next to equally charred trees danced in my head. "Yes, sir," I replied quietly.

Kingston nodded again. "For what it's worth, and I know it's not much, I am sorry for your loss, Lieutenant. Know that no one blames

you; you did all you could before the plasma took you out. And that is no fault of yours."

"Youâ€|you saw the report, sir?" Oh, great. He knew the whole story of how I'd let my men down because of an injury.

"Yes. Now don't beat yourself up about the loss too much. Just take care of the platoon you've got now."

"Yes, sir." I said through gritted teeth. Not because I was angry, but because I feared I was about to cry.

"Your orders are to watch the frontlines these next few days until the relief force arrives. Use the time to get to know first platoon, Bravo Company. Dismissed."

I saluted and was lifting up the flap when the captain called my name again. "Sir?"

"It's ok to shed some gear, Lieutenant. Gets up to 150 degrees out here on mild days."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

And that was that.

4. Chapter 3: Avoid Eye Contact

Author's Note: Well, here's the next chapter. I hope you enjoy it and please let me know what you think ;-)

* * *

>Chapter Three: Avoid Eye Contact**

After my briefing with Captain Kingston, I walked back to the front. By this time, the sun was only getting hotter and hotter, and I was still dressed in full battle gear; the sweat dripped down my face and slid down my back. Jesus, I really wanted a showerâ€|and I'd only been here for two hours.

Once I got within eyesight of the frontlines, Private Beesner approached. He was perspiring and red-faced, and I didn't even want to know what I'd look like once I took my helmet off.

"Ready to meet first platoon, Lieutenant?" Beesner asked.

I unhooked my canteen from my web belt and took a long gulp before answering. "Bee, did they make you my aide?"

The private turned even redder, and this time it wasn't the sun or the heat. "Yes, ma'am. Just till you get settled, the captain said."

I was amused. "Till I get settled, huh?"

"Not my wordsâ€|"

"Don't worry about it. Where can I dump my gear? I'm sweating out of

pores I didn't even know I had."

"The platoon tent is on your right, El-Tee. It's hard to see because of the camo, but I can take you to it."

The private led me several yards out until he opened a flap in what seemed to be the middle of the air. Unlike the company CP, the tents around the front were rendered very nearly invisible for obvious reasons. Once inside, I immediately began taking off some of my heavier and hotter equipment. That meant my battledress jacket, my pack, my helmet, my gloves, my armor, and some other stuff that would probably save my life in a firefight but not in 150-degree heat. By the time I was finished, all I was wearing was my T-shirt, battledress trousers, combat boots, dogtags, and a pair of sunglasses. I had my rifle slung diagonally across my back, rifle ammo and energy bars stashed in my pockets, and web belt with grenades, pistol ammo, and canteen on my waist. Strapped to my right hip was my silenced pistol, and while one of my combat knives was sheathed between my shoulder blades under my shirt, the other was strapped above my left boot. And yet with all that remained on me, I was significantly lighter and cooler with the rest off my body.

While I was dumping my equipment and stripping off layers of garments, I could see Private Beesner getting so red he was almost turning purple. I frowned; it wasn't going to do if Beesner was so obviously attracted to his new lieutenant. He'd only get ridiculed and it would undermine my own authority if the platoon thought anything was going on. Rumors in the Corps spread faster than wildfires in a dry, dead forest.

When I was done getting the stuff off I needed to, I let Beesner follow me out of the tent. I had to talk to him now before we went back to the others, and before things got worse. I stopped him once he came out and looked at him.

"Ma'am?" he croaked. I placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Beesner, I'm going to be blunt. You need to stop this now, and I'll give you two very good reasons among many."

The private had a horrified look on his face. "Wh-what do you mean, Lieutenant?"

"You know what I'm talking about. First reason is this: I am too old for you, kid. And secondly, I'm married. So don't be obvious or you and I will both catch hell for something that is not even happening. Clear?"

"Y-yes, ma'am," Beesner replied.

"All right." With that settled, I looked down at my shirt; the lower half of the right side was soaked in blood. "Now, before we get to the rest of the platoon, let me get this taken care of." I grinned at Beesner. "Wouldn't want to scare 'em, would I?"

"No, ma'am," the private said, smiling back nervously. He looked past me to where there were, no doubt, a few more tents hidden in the hot desert. "Medic should be this way. The real big medical tent is behind the company CP, but Doc'll know if that's where you need to

go."

I followed Private Beesner to a small tent, camouflaged in a similar fashion to the slightly larger one we'd just vacated. Beesner pulled the flap open again and stepped inside ahead of me.

"Hey, Doc, got a minute?" the private asked.

The medic, who was rather handsome and looked to be only a couple of years older than me, glanced up at us; he had a nice face with cropped black hair, blue eyes, and a bit of a stubble on his chin from being in a war zone too long without a shave. At first he didn't see my wound, because he furrowed his black brows into a frown. "Who're you? And what's wrong with you?"

"This is first platoon's new El-Tee, Doc. And she took some shrapnel to her side a couple hours ago," Beesner explained. I turned so the medic could see the blood stained shirt.

Realizing his error at once, the medic's face went into a panicked expression. "Geez, Lieutenantâ€¦I'm really sorry, ma'am. I didn't knowâ€¦and you just went around like normal with that much bloodâ€¦?"

"Maybe not normal; it's been hurting like hell. But I wanted to make sure everything else was taken care of first," I answered.

The medic's face was now pale; he swallowed audibly. "Well, ma'am, all due respect, but I think next time bleeding shrapnel wounds should be a top priority of yoursâ€¦You must've just come back from the CP, right? Didn't Kingston say anything to you?"

"I still had all my gear on then, armor and all. Plus my wound stopped bleeding over an hour ago. I thought it was fine," I said.

The medic gestured for me to come closer as he pulled on a pair of medical exam gloves. "Let's have a look, then."

I sat down on a cot in front of the medic, aware of Beesner standing behind me at the tent's entrance. I was starting to get uncomfortable even with my back turned to him; I could still feel his eyes on me.

"I'm going to check your vital signs first, ma'am, then check out your wound. I can already seeâ€¦something protruding from your side thereâ€¦" He got up from his chair and grabbed a stethoscope. He smiled at me. "Nothing beats good ol' auscultation."

I smiled back. Once you got past hisâ€¦_aggressive_ greeting, the medic had a friendly manner and easy grin. He wasn't so bad.

After listening to my upper chest, back, and sides, he put the stethoscope around his neck. He then produced his datapad from his pocket and entered in his findings. "Your respirations are fine, considering the wound," he said, still looking at his datapad. "The injured side seems to cause a bit of labored breathing, however. Pulse is a bit rapid, but that's expected; your blood pressure is low. Pulse oximetry 94 percent, also just below normal, yet not worrisome." I blinked; I hadn't realized that he'd found all of the

six main vital signs simply by using his stethoscope. "And your temperature's fine, too," the medic continued. He glanced at me with a grin. "No hyperthermia yet, Lieutenant."

"Good to know," I said.

"Ok, ma'am," the medic said once he'd finished his initial assessment. "I'm a bit worried about your BP, but I believe that once we get your wound patched up, it'll fix itself." He slipped his datapad back into his pocket. "I'm going to have to ask you to lift your shirt up for me, ma'am." Even as he said it, the medic briefly glanced at Private Beesner; that meant it was obvious to the doc as well.

I turned around and looked at the private. "Wait for me outside, Beesner. Shouldn't be long."

I seriously thought no one could get redder than Private Beesner did at that moment. Jesus, I thought, mentally shaking my head. The medic waited politely for Beesner to leave the tent before continuing his examination.

"So I see you have an admirer," he commented as he helped me lift the shirt above my right shoulder.

I snorted. "Yeah. I keep telling him he's only going to cause both of us grief, but apparently he can't control himself. Isn't the Marine Corps supposed to teach discipline?"

"Yes, ma'am." He looked up at me with a curious expression on his face. "Though sometimes some things can't be helped."

I tried hard not to laugh; this was getting ridiculous. "So," I said, trying to lighten things up a bit. The tension in the tent was palpable. "Am I dead yet?"

The medic chuckled. "No, not by a long shot. The shrapnel appears to have lodged itself between your armor plates and grazed a couple of ribs, but nothing too serious. Want to tell me how this happened?"

I explained the attack on the Warthog as Beesner, Dandh, and I rode back to the frontlines from the hospital shuttle landing site. The medic found the story amusing.

"So you came planetside from the hospital only to look for a ticket back?" he asked.

"I wasn't looking to go back, I was just shielding Corporal Dandh."

"That's very noble of you, El-Tee." The medic was cleaning and disinfecting my wound now, preparing to take the piece of shrapnel out. "Now, tell me, ma'am, could you describe and rate your pain for me?"

I'd been through this drill at the hospital, so I knew exactly what he meant. "Pain feels like a burning and tearing sensation, and it's about a seven out of ten."

The medic gave me a chastising look. "And you didn't think this was

that bad?" When I didn't answer, the medic threw away the cloth he'd used to sterilize my wound, now bloodied. "I'm going to take the shrapnel out now, ma'am. I'm going to need you to hold still, 'cause this'll hurt."

I winced and bit my lower lip as the medic removed the small piece of shrapnel from my side. I flinched when the piece of metal came out, and the medic looked at me.

"You all right?"

I shut my eyes hard and clenched my fists. "Christ, that hurt. I think I'm ok, though."

The medic gave me a small smile. "You're brave, that's for sure." He handed me the bit of the Ghost I'd blown up that had eventually embedded itself in my ribs. "'Least you have a souvenir now. All right. I'm going to put biofoam in the wound and bandage it up now. Should be fine after that, good as new."

The biofoam insertion and bandaging didn't take long; in no time, I was good to go again.

"All done, Lieutenant," the medic said when he was done. He checked my blood pressure a second time and found it normal. "Try not to get hurt again, huh?" he said, grinning.

"Not planning to," I assured him with a laugh.

As he stood and took his gloves off, he flashed a different kind of smile at me. "I'm Petty Officer Second Class Michael Reynolds, by the way."

"Lieutenant Natalie Cooper, Doc. And thanks for the fix."

PO2 Reynolds winked at me. "Anytime, El-Tee."

I walked out of the medic's tent somewhat healed, but definitely confused.

5. Chapter 4: When You're the New Kid

Author's Note: Hey, I'm back with chapter 4. I spent most of this past weekend and this week writing a bunch. Managed to get a lot of future chapters done (almost 8!) and made detailed outlines up to the story's end ;-). Anyway, hope you enjoy and please R&R. Thanks.

* * *

>Chapter Four: When You're the New Kid on the Block**

I shook off the awkward feeling and stood for a moment, looking out at the sand and small groups of soldiers beyond. Most of those soldiers were my men and women, the Marines of first platoon, Bravo Company. But where the hell was Beesner?

I shrugged to myself and began walking back to the line, thinking that that's where my so-called aide had gone. Private Beesner was a

good kid with relatively good intentions, but sometimes he could be a pain in the rear.

As I neared the front, I slung my rifle down from my shoulder and kept an eye on what lay ahead. Just because we were moving out in five days didn't mean the Covenant wouldn't attack, perhaps even en masse.

"Lieutenant!" I turned to the sound of the voice, assuming it was directed at me. I saw Beesner jogging over from the medic's tent. "Sorry," he said once he'd gotten to me. "Didn't see you come out, ma'am."

"Where'd you go, Bee?" I asked him.

"To the latrine, Lieutenant." I was impressed; he'd managed to say it without turning the color of a fire engine.

"First platoon here?" I said, gesturing to the Marines lying in sandy foxholes and makeshift trenches. Some things about wars, even modern ones, never changed.

"Yes, ma'am."

"How many? Any holes in the roster?" I waited for Beesner to transmit the info to my datapad; I kind of wanted my helmet now.

"There's nineteen men and eleven women, tenâ€|vacancies, ma'am."

"That's adequate, actually." The last platoon I'd commanded was at about half its normal strength and size. I shook my head; if our captain had authorized the stop we were supposed to have made for reinforcements, would it have made a difference? Would my former platoon members still be alive?

I dismissed the thought immediately. The idiotic captain had been killed, and I now had a new platoon to watch over, to make sure such a life-ending error never happened again.

I put my datapad back in my pocket and keyed a mike on my shirt, again wishing for my helmet for easier access. I opened a channel to first platoon's members. "First platoon, this is Lieutenant Cooper. Meet at this location for a short briefing." I sent the platoon a map of the area with my position just behind a tall bunker highlighted.

Within a few minutes, all thirty present soldiers of first platoon, including Beesner and Dandh, were formed up around me. Private Beesner stood beside me, trying to look as tall as possible; under different circumstances, I would have found it amusing. The rest of the troops stood a bit outside the imaginary circle of my space.

"First platoon, I am Lieutenant Natalie Cooper, your new commanding officer," I began. The faces around me were now looking with interest, probably sizing me up to make sure I was good enough for the job. Not that they had a say in it, but it was better to be on good terms with your troops, and I personally cared for every single one of them. After all, their lives were in my hands, and I had no

doubt that I would get to know them all as well as the members of my former platoon.

"I've just arrived from the Heathan forest, over on Walter's Peak," I said, continuing. Judging by the look on their faces, the troops were beginning to notice the blood on my shirt now. "The fighting there was fierce, and we took sizable casualties. I was in the intensive care unit of the orbital hospital for thirty-three days, plus ten days of treatment and surgery to remove the burn scars from my back. The short of it is, you were in need of a lieutenant, and I was in need of a platoon. So here I am, and I look forward to serving with each of you. Questions?"

"Orders, Lieutenant?" one of the young soldiers asked.

"Maintain the lines for now," I answered. "Watch for activity, and be prepared for a briefing sometime later today. I've been informed from the higher-ups that we may have some good news shortly. Now, do we have any scouts and snipers?"

"Ma'am, Gunnery Sergeant Hills," another Marine said. "I'm the platoon sergeant. Currently, we have four scouts and six snipers."

"Ok, Gunny. I'll want their names and positions; there may be some shuffling going on. The rest of you may return to your places on the line, and make sure you get something to eat. Rotate watches and get sleep if you haven't gotten any yet. The quiet times are the most dangerous, people. That is all. Dismissed."

For the next several hours, I sat in a sandy foxhole on the frontline, looking over first platoon's service records, brief bios, and their current positions. Private James Beesner was eighteen years old from Duncan, Coral, and this was his first deployment; Petty Officer Michael Reynolds was twenty-six years old from Portland, Earth, and he'd been fighting Covenant for eight years. He'd saved many hundreds of lives, been decorated for bravery four times, and was presently in his sixth major campaign.

Focusing my mind on the important stuff, I made some minor adjustments to the soldiers on the lines, as well as the snipers. I had the platoon scouts set up an observation post about two clicks forward of the main line, and told them to keep silent and stay invisible. Eventually I got up from the hole, dusted the sand off me, and went back to the platoon tent to grab one of my field rations. It was two in the afternoon, and I hadn't eaten since the evening before; still, it was probably the shortest interval between meals I'd seen in my combat career.

Walking to the tent, I started getting light-headed; my datapad informed me it was 157 degrees in the sun. If the articles that made up my uniform, including my shirt, hadn't had special cooling mechanisms injected into the fabric, our whole company would have dropped dead from hyperthermia. As it was, I'd been hot, red-faced, and sticky and wet from sweat since dawn. I took a long drink from my canteen; Captain Kingston had kept an eye on Bravo Company all day, making sure they'd had enough water in the unbearable heat. Simply put, I'd been drinking alarming quantities of water without proportionate urination because of the amount of fluids I lost in perspiration. PO2 Reynolds, my platoon's medic, was under orders to

check each soldier in first platoon twice daily for signs or symptoms of heat stroke, heat exhaustion, or dehydration.

When I finally reached the tent, I pulled up the flap and practically collapsed on the ground. In here it was nice and cool, in addition to being shaded from the blaring sun.

No, I reminded myself. _Not sun. _Suns_, plural_.

In the Heathan forest, where most of our battles and operations had been performed under the cover of darkness, I hadn't really noticed the fact that Heath was surrounded by two suns instead of one. I suppose it wasn't all that weird; I'd been born and raised on a planet with two moons, so why did two suns seem so different?

In any case, the fact that Heath had two suns suddenly made it clear why its deserts were so freaking _hot_.

Whatever, I thought to myself, getting off the ground and moving towards my pack. After rummaging in the bag for a few seconds, I pulled out one of my two field rations. I braced myself for the hike back to the lines in the suns, and jumped back into my hole in the sand. More often than not, soldiering was a miserable business.

But, hey, _somebody_ had to stop bloodthirsty aliens from taking over colonized human space.

I had just ripped open the package of self-heating food and began eating when I heard my name.

"Cooper!"

The Covenant better be glassing the planet—I thought bitterly as I placed my food packet at my feet. I picked up my rifle, which was propped up against the edge of my foxhole, and jogged to the voice.

I saw Captain Kingston walking towards me and met him halfway.

"Sir?"

"Briefing, company CP, ten minutes. Get someone to cover you, Lieutenant," Kingston ordered.

"Yes, sir!"

I jogged back to my foxhole, and cursed when I saw what had happened to my late lunch: the package of chicken, potatoes, and vegetables now included a large helping of _sand_.

Stupid wind, sand, Covenant, briefing—|

The list in my head was endless.

I keyed the mike on my shirt and got a hold of my platoon sergeant. I told him to take care of first platoon for me while I was at the briefing, then went back to my package. I wouldn't have enough time to finish it _and_ make it to the briefing on time, but I found something in my pockets to cover it up with.

Some minutes later, I was in the captain's tent once again, waiting for the other two lieutenants of Bravo Company to show up.

"This about the relief force, sir?" I asked Kingston.

"Yes," the captain replied. "And it's also an opportunity for you to meet the officers you'll be working with. Coordinated attacks---and defenses---are key."

"Yes, sir."

The first lieutenant to show up was, much to my surprise, wearing armor plates, helmet, and gloves; the only thing missing on him was the jacket. I had a feeling that his platoon's medic was probably checking on him four times a day rather than two. Once he took his helmet off, he was your standard blonde-haired, blue-eyed man with the classic Marine haircut. He looked to be a few years older than I was, and seemed to have the words "boring" and "bland" written all over him.

"Sir! Lieutenant Jon Smythe reporting, sir!"

Bland name, too.

"Cooper, this is third platoon's commander," Captain Kingston said. To Lieutenant Smythe, he added, "At ease, Lieutenant." Now that he was free to look, Smythe glanced at me with a look just short of distaste. I stood off to the side of the tent, arms folded across my chest, trying to avoid eye contact with the newcomer.

But, alas, it was not to be. Lieutenant Smythe came slightly closer and said gruffly, "Who're you?"

"Jon, this is Lieutenant Natalie Cooper. She's first platoon's commanding officer now. She's joined us from the Heathan forest, after recovering from wounds sustained in the battle there," Kingston explained.

"You're the one who left your platoon to die?" Smythe asked, disgusted.

"You son of a bitch," I hissed, and, without thinking, took a swing at him. I caught him square in the jaw, not minding the sting it left on my punching hand. The other lieutenant shook off his surprise at the blow and was getting ready to pound my face when Captain Kingston got between us.

"That's enough!" he bellowed. Glaring at both of us, Kingston added, "We are fighting the Covenant, not each other! If we attack ourselves then, hell, the Covies have nothing to do but wait it out! If we weren't short on good soldiers right now, you'd both be sent to the brig _immediately_! Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," Smythe spat, glowering at me.

"Crystal clear, Captain," I said, looking away from the lieutenant. I didn't want more trouble from him.

"Good. Now please, act like civilized men and women, or I'll have to

reconsider pretending this never happened." The captain moved closer to the other lieutenant now and said quietly but fiercely, "And Smythe, that was way out of line."

Before things got more interesting, second platoon's lieutenant showed up. Like Smythe, second platoon's commander was older than I was, which probably meant I'd have to prove myself to both of them. Well, screw Smythe, at least.

"Hey, Graham, missed the performance," I heard Lieutenant Smythe whisper to the other lieutenant. He looked me in the eyes, making sure I heard but not Kingston.

"Sir! Lieutenant Tracey Graham reporting, sir!" the lieutenant said. After the formalities, Captain Kingston again introduced me, this time to Lieutenant Graham.

Graham smiled at me and stuck out her hand. "Welcome to Bravo, Lieutenant Cooper," she said.

"Thanks," I replied, shaking Graham's hand. I didn't realize that in the process of lifting my right arm, I exposed the bloodstains on my shirt to everyone. I had to field a couple of questions from Kingston and Graham; Smythe just scowled silently.

Captain Kingston started in on the briefing after that. He told the other two lieutenants about the relief force, and ordered us to hold the lines "without heroics---there's no reason why we should lose good Marines five days before our relief comes."

Having been dismissed shortly after the briefing began, I filed out of the tent behind Graham and Smythe. Before Smythe could return to third platoon, however, I made it a point to deliberately get in his way.

"Look," he growled, "I don't fancy a trial and the inside of a prison. Walk away, now."

I snorted. "All you'd see is the inside of a hospital."

Lieutenant Smythe looked as if he were about to react, but thought better of it. He settled for bumping my shoulder roughly as he walked past me.

"Those Marines were my family, _Smythe_," I called after him. "As long as I was conscious and able to fight, I _never_ _would_ have left their side."

Lieutenant Smythe kept on walking.

6. Chapter 5: Check Up or Checking Me Out?

Author's Note: Hey everybody. Just wanted to let you know I went back and edited some parts of the previous chapters; should help with the flow of the story a little better. Enjoy and peace!

P.S. I know Coral wasn't glassed till later, but, as I mentioned in the intro, my timeline is a little off the regular one.

* * *

>Chapter Five: Check Up or Checking Me Out?

I hiked back to the lines, angry, bitter, and hot as hell. I took another drink of water from my canteen before reaching the others, and found it was getting close to empty. I'd have to fill up soon.

First, though, I relayed the news that we were being relieved to first platoon. Had we not been under strict rules about loud noises, they would have burst into cheers; as it was, they were all grinning widely. Seeing my troops happy brought my spirits back up.

Crouching back down into my foxhole, however, sent them plunging again. The cover I'd placed on my package did little to keep the food inside warm and sand-free. Hungry soldiers couldn't complain, but let's just say my meal was a lot crunchier than it should have been. At least the candy bar and self-cooling carton of milk that came in the meal packet were sealed individually; combat soldiers needed calorie-rich foods, both for simple functioning and because meals were eaten irregularly.

With my stomach full, I was in a much better mood. I picked up my rifle, which was again propped on its usual place, and went down the line to each foxhole. I spoke some to my platoon members, as much to keep morale up as to get to know them. When I walked back to my hole, Beesner was sitting in it; I'd rotated him out to the observation post for a few hours.

"How was it out there?" I asked, jumping into the hole with him. With two Marines and two rifles, it was a lot more crowded in here now.

"Quiet," Private Beesner said, looking away.

I gave him a nudge with my boot. "What's wrong?"

It was while Beesner looked out at the heat waves rolling across the desert that I noticed that tell-tale twinkle in his eyes; he didn't want me to see the tears rolling silently down his red cheeks.

I saw him swallow hard. "I, uh, I got a letter chip from the UNSC Marine Corps this afternoon, Lieutenant." He started speaking faster, getting it all out quick so he could control his emotions. "Coral was glassed by the Covies. My family's all dead."

The shock nearly took the wind out of me. What a horrible thing for such a young kid to experience. For anyone. "Jesus Christ, Beesner," I whispered slowly. "I don't even know what to sayâ€|"

"Don't," Beesner said, voice trembling. He was hanging on by a thread, and he knew it. "Justâ€|let meâ€|sit here for a while."

I listened to what the young private said and gave him the space he neededâ€|well, as much space as you can give someone when you're both cramped in a small foxhole. I kept quiet and tried not to look at him too much, but sometimes I stole glances at him. For the better part of two hours, all he did was stare out at the desert, stony-faced, the clear white streaks on his crimson face the only remnants of

dried tears. He didn't cry anymore, but gone was his youthful enthusiasm and innocence. Like me, trauma had caused him to grow up too fast; I suddenly felt a greater connection to the young private, and I knew poor Beesner would never be the same.

A short while later, my eyes started getting droopy. I'd been awake since two that morning, and it was now nearing evening on this side of Heath. I'd gone days without sleep before, but when the opportunity presented itself, I slept all I could. Soon after I'd first spotted signs of my fatigue, I was dozing.

What seemed like only minutes later, I felt something nudging my shoulder. Still half-asleep at first, I thought nothing of it until I was nudged harder. Acting out of pure reflex, I unholstered my silenced pistol and aimed it at whatever was touching me as I was still waking up.

"Whoa!" the figure in the dark stepped back and threw his hands up as if surrendering. "It's Doc, it's Doc!" he whispered frantically.

The adrenaline in my system winding down after the sharp spike, I lowered my weapon and sighed. "Ah, Christ," I said. I switched my contact lenses to night vision so I could make sure the figure standing above me was who he said he was.

"Sorry to wake you, ma'am. But I've been going around checking everyone for problems with the heat. Captain's orders, Lieutenant," Petty Officer Reynolds told me, voice low. I thought it strange he was whispering now that he'd woken me up, but then I glanced at Beesner; he was snoring lightly on the other side of the foxhole. "Other side" simply meant opposite me because of the hole's size.

_Oh, God, poor Beesner_â€¦I thought, suddenly remembering what he'd told me.

"Ma'am?"

"Huh? Yeah, it's fine. I'm coming," I said, trying to shake the drowsiness I still felt. I checked my watch as I picked up my rifle and carefully eased myself out of the hole; it was nighttime now, and I'd been asleep for four hours.

"So are these heat checks always going to be at midday and at night?" I asked the medic once we started walking.

"Yes, ma'am. Makes sure you're good to go in the morning and the afternoon. They're not needed overnight because the desert tends to get a whole lot cooler. Also, the Covenant like to probe our lines at night as well."

It didn't take long for us to reach the medic's tent, although it was just as invisible at night as it was during the day. I'd have to remember where all the hidden tents were so that I didn't accidentally stumble into one some time.

"Have a seat on the cot if you will, Lieutenant," Reynolds said, pulling on a fresh set of gloves and grabbing his stethoscope. "I'll want to check how your wound is doing, as well."

I sat down where he'd indicated, and waited for his exam to begin.

"I'm going to check your skin first," the medic said, placing the back of his hand against mine.

"What're you looking for?" I asked, curious.

"Seeing if the skin feels hot. That's a bad sign. Beyond that, I'm looking for any other abnormalities: seeing if your skin is especially pale, or wet, or dry, or anything out of the ordinary." He looked at me, barely concealing his grin. "Lucky for you, your skin is perfect. No problems with the heat."

Except for the fact that I felt my cheeks flush.

"Ever feel light-headed during the day, have any muscle cramps, or anything?" Doc Reynolds asked, getting serious once again as he checked my pupils with a penlight.

"No," I answered. "Well, maybe a little light-headed, when I walked to the platoon tent. It was 157 outside."

"Hmm. Diaphoresis during the day, El-Tee?"

"Are you kidding me? That's all I did the whole day."

"The extreme temperatures tend to do that. But believe it or not, it's a good thing. It's when it stops that you're in deep trouble and risk heat stroke."

He set the penlight onto the tiny desk beside him, and proceeded to check my vital signs, paying special attention to my temperature and blood pressure.

"Good news, El-Tee," he said. "Everything checks out. When you came in this morning, I was worried that you might have been going into shock from the wound. Several signs were present, although you were still conscious and thinking clearly. Nausea or vomiting today?"

"None."

"That settles it. Now I want to check out that shrapnel wound, ma'am. I'm going to clean it, insert new biofoam, and wrap it in some fresh dressings."

After lifting my shirt again, the medic started to gently remove the bandages he had placed this morning. Although the medic had explained that the shrapnel had not gone deep enough to crack my ribs, it had essentially cut into two of them on the superficial bone layer. Consequently, my right side had ached all day, and the spot was sore to the touch. I tried hard not to let my pain and discomfort show while the medic inspected the wound.

"Does it hurt to breathe?" he asked, glancing up at me to listen to my answer.

"Every friggin' time, Doc," I answered, wincing.

"Well, the biofoam's starting to work, at least. It looks like the wound bled only minimally after application of the dressing. You'll have to remove the scar on your side from when the metal punctured your skin, though."

Reynolds cleaned my wound again and injected biofoam before wrapping fresh bandages around it. When he was done, he removed his gloves and washed his hands at the small sink built into his desk. Battlefield medical technology had certainly improved over the centuries.

"All done here, Lieutenant. Make sure you drink lots of water, and check with an equipment tech if you think you're having issues with your uniform systems. It's bad news if your cooling mechanisms fail out here." He looked up from documenting the visit on his datapad and smiled. "See you tomorrow, ma'am."

7. Chapter 6: Nice of You to Stop By

Chapter Six: Nice of You to Stop By

"So? What's the skinny, Corporal?" I asked, crouching over to the platoon's observation post. I held my rifle tightly in both hands, and strained to hear any unusual sounds in the black night. Why Captain Kingston had needed a ten-man patrol at one in the morning, just when I'd fallen into a deep sleep in my foxhole, I didn't know. But here I was, following his strange orders anyway; the rest of my patrol team was hiding amongst the jagged rocks that provided cover in this part of the desert.

"Nothing to report, Lieutenant," Corporal Simmons replied. "We've been watching 'em for eight hours. In that time, they've sent out two small patrols, trying to find and probe our lines." The Marine shrugged. "They never got close enough for us to believe an attack was imminent."

I thought about what Simmons said. To my knowledge, the Covenant had always been rather perceptive as to where our lines were. This was not their usual behavior, and anything out of the ordinary with these aliens meant trouble.

"Thanks, Simmons," I said to the corporal.

"Ma'am, I think they're up to something. Maybe something big," another Marine at the OP commented.

"My thoughts exactly, Private."

Corporal Simmons looked out at the desert from her perch atop a tall but concealed position among the rocks. She was staring down at the alien encampment, several yards away, with night-vision binoculars.

"Still no movement," she announced. "I'd say it's safe to give them a little wake up call, but it's your choice, ma'am."

I wasn't quite convinced it was worth risking the lives of my new platoon members yet. "Let me have a look, Corporal."

"Yes, ma'am," Simmons said, handing me her field binoculars.

I did a sweep of the Covenant's position with the binoculars, and found it was nearly empty. Few guards patrolled the perimeter, and I assumed the rest were asleep beneath the fortified bunkers. We could have struck the camp with a rocket attack, and the Covies inside would have gone on snoring.

"If we can do this quick and without getting seen, we may have a shot at getting an estimate of their numbers," I said, thinking aloud as I handed back the binoculars.

"You really gonna risk it, El-Tee?" the private in the OP asked.

"Captain's orders, kid. As long as there's not a visible threat,"

I really wondered about that sometimes. Most threats, in my experience, were hidden.

"Ok, Marines. This is the last radio transmission before the raid. We go in silent, stay silent, and go out silent. Take note of how many Covies there are inside, and keep the body count to a minimum. Let's move it out and be back in ten," I ordered over the COM channel. For this night op, I'd decided on putting my armor, gloves, and helmet back on since it wasn't so hot out anymore. Plus with close-quarters combat, you were pretty much dead with no protective gear.

I watched silently through my night-vision contact lenses as nine Marines from my platoon scampered down the jagged desert rocks to the sand below. The tenth was Private Beesner, and he moved out with me once the patrol team was set up at the bottom. Once there, I took point and began leading my Marines to the Covenant camp ahead.

Originally, I'd planned on leaving Beesner behind on this op, as I felt he obviously was not emotionally equipped at the moment for combat patrols. But he'd insisted, arguing that being left alone with his thoughts was just about the worst thing that could happen to him. Any distraction, Private Beesner said, would be welcome. Besides, he didn't want to let his platoon-mates, his only family left, down.

And I had to admit that so far, he hadn't gotten into any trouble.

The alien camp loomed ahead; it had taken less time to get here than I thought it would. I crouched and looked behind me at the ten hidden Marines. I made a hand signal that indicated for them to halt while I went ahead and scouted the area. I took Beesner with me.

I held my silenced battle rifle to bear, looking down the sights as I swept it across the landscape. There: two Covenant guards watching out for trouble in the darkness. They were about to get an early-morning surprise.

Using my scope, I aimed carefully at the senior Elite's head; the alien had on the midnight-black armor of a Spec-Ops commander. I motioned to Private Beesner, explaining using only my hands that he was to kill the other guard at the same time I shot mine. I steadied

my breathing until I had the commander in red in my crosshairs, then held my breath as I counted down for Beesner.

Three, two, oneâ€¦my last finger dropped the same instant the Elite commander's body fell to the ground. A split-second later, Private Beesner's target slumped in the sand as well.

I gave Beesner a thumbs-up, then turned to the rest of the patrol team, waiting behind us in the shadows. I gestured for them to move up, quietly and one at a time. Without any guards to bother with, we'd be in and out in no time.

The entrance to the bunker was dark, but with night vision it was easy to see. Before entering the structure, I slung my rifle on my shoulder and brought out my silenced pistol instead. Having been trained in stealth earlier in my military career, I preferred silenced pistols when on a clandestine mission.

I was the first one in; looking around in night vision, I saw nothing suggesting alien life in the hallway I'd gone into. Switching to infrared proved the results of the visual scan. I took another few cautious steps, waited for my team to ease inside the structure behind me---

And all hell broke loose.

My motion tracker had suddenly gone haywire. Red blips popped up everywhere but behind us, which meant the entrance. I hesitated for just a heartbeat, half-expecting lights and sirens to go off.

I quickly returned to reality when boiling plasma and exploding needles began assaulting my position behind a wall. I brought my pistol level with the first alien I spotted, a warbling little Grunt, and shot it nearly point-blank. The alien's corpse splattered blood on both the wall and my uniform as it spun once before hitting the deck.

As I was crouching, Beesner came up behind me and stood tall, shooting off rounds from his silenced rifle above my head; the narrow corridor was too tight to allow the others to pitch in.

Within seconds, the couple of Grunts turned into seven, plus two squaking Jackals. As Beesner reloaded his rifle, I shot three of the Grunts in quick succession with my pistol. Not wanting to stick around and wake up the whole Covenant force, I tried to disengage from the fight.

I wasn't successful.

The private and I had already killed about a half-dozen Covenant, so that there were now multi-colored splotches on the walls and plenty of bodies at our feet. However, instead of decreasing, the number of red blips was growing _larger_. This was no good.

I was still firing off my pistol when I heard a _click_ after squeezing the trigger. I cursed and grabbed a fresh clip from one of my pockets, all the while feeling the waves of heat as plasma rounds whizzed past me. When I was finally done reloading, I looked up in time to see a running Grunt coming towards us.

A bright blue point of light glowed on its chest.

"Grenade!" I yelled.

I quickly reacted without thinking. I shoved Beesner back behind the wall and shot off a few pistol rounds to take out the Grunt. The first bullet missed, but the second found its target. The round ripped open the alien's methane mask, leaking toxic gas and blood at the same time. Bullet number three tore through the alien's neck, and brought the suicidal combatant to the ground. With no time left to get to safer cover, I went prone as the plasma grenade went off.

The explosion pushed me back against the bulkhead, and I screamed inside my helmet as my injured ribs took the brunt of the force.

When the blast was over, all I could hear was the ringing of my ears.

Holding onto my right side, I slowly got up off the ground, trying to clear the disorientation from my head. Holding up my pistol, I fired shots at the remaining aliens, keeping them pinned as I got the hell out of Dodge.

Seeing Private Beesner standing behind me, I gestured frantically for the private to start heading out the way we came in. He tapped the shoulder of the Marine ahead of him and motioned for the soldier to keep our exit clear. The Marine nodded and quickly got behind me as I, too, filed out of the corridor and out of the bunker. It would have been bad for the patrol team if I had been shot in the back—and I admit I didn't much like the thought, either.

Once out into the night again, I breathed a silent sigh of relief and waved my arms for the team to high tail it out. I saw the Marine behind me fire shots at invisible targets, my view obscured by the bunker walls of the entrance. Then the soldier turned to face me and started sprinting.

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I did the same.

"Get anything, El-Tee?" Corporal Simmons asked once we'd all made it back safely to the observation post. So far, the fears that the Covenant would follow us with a large force and attack had proved to be unfounded. But, as it was early morning, the day was still young.

I paused for a while, easing my breathing so that my ribs wouldn't give me unbearable pain. Between the sprint, the adrenaline, and the tiny amount of fear coursing through my body, that was hard to do.

"Yeah," I finally answered. "They've got a lot more troops deep inside that place, though you wouldn't guess it from the outside." I turned to face the soldier who'd watched my six as we were exiting. "Thanks for seeing me out the door, Marine."

The Marine's visor lifted, and a grin emerged from the face that had been hidden. "My pleasure, ma'am. I'd say this makes up for my being a jerk earlier?"

I laughed, though that hurt, too. "We'll call it even, Corporal Dandh."

"Did good, Lieutenant. No casualties, and we got what we needed," one of the other Marines said.

"Just got lucky, I suppose," I replied, slightly disappointed. I knew the patrol hadn't gone as planned, and that I'd have to be much more careful the next time we went out.

Just goes to show how unpredictable the Covenant can be, I thought.

8. Chapter 7: Not a Love Letter, But Close

Chapter Seven: Not a Love Letter, But Close

The next three days passed in much the same way as the first: it was hot, we had Reynolds check on the platoon, another night patrol, a short company briefing or two, and many interruptions when I was either eating or asleep. I went down the lines to talk to my platoon members, listening and encouraging, and rotated teams of four to the observation post. I also focused as much time as I could on Beesner, making sure he kept busy and was coping ok.

On the fourth day, I spent the morning in Kingston's command post, discussing plans on how our relief was to arrive the next day. It had been decided by Battalion HQ that Bravo would maintain its position until our relief came at 1400 hours tomorrow. This would prevent us from leaving the lines entirely unattended while the next group showed up.

It was noon now. I walked under the direct rays of both suns as I made my way to the hole I shared with my aide. Soon, I would have to go to the medic's tent so that Petty Officer Reynolds could make his first check of the day.

"Lieutenant Cooper!"

A Marine in full battle gear came running towards me, trailing sweat the whole way. He stopped in front of me and I noticed that his insignia was not the same as mine; he was from a different unit.

"What do you need, Lance Corporal?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow at him.

"Mail, ma'am," the Marine said. "I'm sorry, Lieutenantâ€¦I was supposed to give you this a few days ago with everyone else's, but it got lost in the shuffle. Took me a while to find you guys all the way out here." He dug in his pack and handed me five rectangle-shaped cartridges. "Here you go, ma'am. Again, I apologize for---"

I waved a dismissive hand at him. "No worries. Thanks for tracking me down."

The lance corporal brightened. "You're welcome, Lieutenant." And just as quickly as he'd arrived, he was gone again.

I continued towards my hole, which was now only a few yards away, happily holding my letters. Unfortunately, only official notices, messages, and news came up on military datapads. For any unauthorized messages, everyone had to wait for the mail to show up.

Jumping into my foxhole, I placed my rifle in its usual spot and looked at the five cartridges. One was from my mother; strangely, the address was on Earth, not Mars, but I was sure she'd explain. Three others were from my siblings: my older brother Lieutenant Commander Mark Cooper, my younger brother Second Lieutenant Travis Cooper, and our little sister Officer Cadet Allison Cooper. It was the final letter, however, that put a wide grin on my face.

"Hey, you finally got your stuff, El-Tee," Beesner said, sitting up from his slumped position. Seeing my expression, he gave me a quizzical look. "Who's that from?"

"My husband," I replied, pulling my datapad out of one of my pockets.

Beesner coughed and I glanced up at him for a second. There it was: the private's cheeks turned red as my home planet.

I shook my head, trying hard not to laugh at Beesner's expression. I leaned back in the hole as I took the small, thin card from the cartridge and placed it into my datapad. I pressed a button and waited to see the video letter; after a five-second load time, a Marine's face, serious, appeared onscreen.

"Lieutenant William 'Willis' Hawk here. December 31, 2551. 2147 hours, location classified," he said, beginning the video with the customary information first. Then his face broke into a big smile as his real message began. "Hey, Coop, it's me. Just waiting for the New Year to ring in, wishing you were here. My squadron and I have been on maneuvers all day, even though it's New Year's Eve, but at least they gave us the night off. I'm trying hard to stay relatively sober so this message will be coherent."

I laughed. God, I missed him.

"We flight-tested new prototypes this week, and of course it's all stuff I can't talk about," Willis continued with a wink. "But we also flew practice missions with the standard birds, and training's been getting tougher and tougher. I've got the feeling that there may be something big coming up soon, but who knows."

"Besides the training, me and some of the others pilots have been on combat runs a couple times. Mostly routine, but I'll admit it has gotten a little hairy out there. Try not to worry about me, though. I think I know what I'm doing." Willis chuckled a bit and grabbed a beer bottle from somewhere off-screen. He took a drink and then raised it towards me. "Well, I'm just getting increasingly intoxicated, Cooper. Cheers, babe, and I hope you're having a wonderful New Year's Eve as well, hopefully not out on the lines. I haven't heard from you in a couple of months, and I must confess it's got me a little worried. But I know I would've been notified if something happened, so maybe there's no reason for me to fret just yet."

"I miss you like crazy, Natalie, and I love you." My husband grinned.

"Semper fi, do or die, Coop! And here comes 2552!"

The message ended.

My eyes were suddenly itchy, and not from all the sand that blew twenty-four hours a day. I hadn't seen Willis---face to face---in seven months, and I hadn't been able to send messages because of the wounds I'd been recovering from. Apparently at the date of his message, Willis had not yet received the news of my near-fatal experience, and I felt awful to make him worry. Just after getting discharged from the hospital and before coming planetside, I'd sent him my first message since the incident. I told him I had recovered and was getting placed back on the line, but he probably wouldn't get that message for at least two weeks. In the meantime, he would have received an official letter telling him that I'd been wounded in action. And that was all he'd know until my new message reached him.

"Bee?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You're one of the bravest kids I know," I said, putting Willis's message chip into my pocket. The young private was getting through a horrendous time in his life---one without his family---with an astonishing amount of dignity and stoicism. I was no psychologist; I had no idea if that was a good sign or a bad one. I just knew I admired the hell out of him, because I knew I could never go on with life with all my family dead. Family was more important than anything else in my mind.

And right now, to save my family from the Covenant, I had to be separated from them...and it was slowly killing me every day.

9. Chapter 8: Paranoid Much?

Author's Note: Don't get all excited about Cooper's mother, she's not Halsey lol. Enjoy and please R&R.

* * *

>Chapter Eight: Paranoid Much?**

After watching the video letter Willis had sent me, I watched my mother's. As usual, it was rife with advice, worry, news, and this time with an explanation as to why she was now living in St. Louis, Missouri. Little known to those outside the family was the fact that my mother was a high-ranking scientist for the UNSC's ONI, the Office of Naval Intelligence. She was a civilian, but she worked with some of the top minds and military brass humans had to offer. Since nearly all the projects my mother was involved in were top secret, she said she was "not allowed to discuss why we moved here," but I knew it had something to do with her work.

Also enclosed with the letter chip was a short video of my son.

When Gabriel was born, I'd had to ship out to a new post within a few weeks; obviously it didn't make any sense to bring my newborn son with me. My mother fell in love with little Gabe the first time she

saw him, and volunteered to watch him. This freed up Willis and I to continue our combat duties, but it was hard on both Gabe and us, his parents. My heart ached when I read that Gabe had spoken his first words a while ago and I'd missed it.

"Who's that?" Beesner said, leaning over to see the video in my hand.

"This, Bee, is my kid," I said, handing over the datapad for the private to see.

"Kid?" he asked incredulously. "How old is he?"

"Nineteen months. He'll be two in June."

"Has it been a long time since you've seen him?"

"Yeah. Last time I saw him it was his first birthday." That had been the last time Willis, Gabe, and I were all together, and I hadn't seen either of them since.

"You didn't mention you had a son before, Lieutenant," Beesner said, handing back the datapad. I shrugged.

"I don't like to talk about personal stuff that much."

"Oh."

I was about to check out the letters from my brothers and sister when a voice called my name.

"Natalie!"

I knew it had to be one of the other lieutenants or the captain, since the speaker had used my first name. Sure enough, when I turned around, I saw Lieutenant Graham jogging towards me.

"Didn't we spend all morning in the command post?" I complained. "What's Kingston want now?"

"Says he got a message from our relief," she said, standing over the foxhole. "They're going to come later than expected, and the captain's worried." She looked at Private Beesner as if he shouldn't be hearing the conversation. "What about the kid?"

"It's all right, he's my aide," I said.

"Ok, well, Kingston's decided he wants all of us back now to discuss alternative plans."

"What the hell for? How long of a delay are we talking about?"

"Several hours at most. Nothing I'd worry about, butâ€¦" she shrugged.

I was starting to fear that my early assessment of Captain Kingston---that he was a good and rational commander---had been wrong.

"Fine. Beesner, watch the line. I'll be right back," I said, grabbing my rifle and climbing out of the hole.

"Yes, ma'am," Private Beesner replied, looking out across the desert with his rifle's scope.

"So what's this meeting about? How to twiddle your thumbs for a few more hours than planned?" I asked Lieutenant Graham as we walked toward the company CP. She laughed.

"Nope. Seems the captain is jumpy if you ask me, though. I've worked with him for a year now, and he's always been especially cautious when we're about to pull out. Normally that's a good thing, but I've found that he exaggerates often in these situations."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Sorry. I tend to analyze people a little too much. I was a psychology major in college."

"Oh."

"You?"

"What?"

"Heard you went to the Naval Academy on Reach. What'd you study there?"

"Double-majored in astrophysics and engineering, before our class got pulled."

Graham came to an abrupt halt and turned to face me. "Christ," she said. "You're a regular Einstein, Cooper."

"Nah. I always knew my destiny would lead me to the frontlines. It's just that I planned on constructing better Shaw-Fujikawa engines for ships, too." I shrugged. "It was fascinating work, but I think I'm doing more good here."

"If you ask me, they should be saving the brains like you. You could've helped build our fleet up."

"Way I see it, I'm right where I'm supposed to be." I grinned. "Otherwise, I'd be somewhere else."

Lieutenant Graham chuckled. "You're an interesting kid, Cooper. Let's see what Kingston's got for us."

10. Chapter 9: How About a Raincheck?

****Chapter Nine: How About a Raincheck For the Next Life?****

When Lieutenant Graham and I arrived at the company command post, the captain looked anything but pleased. He said the extra supplies that we hadn't used were already stored for the shuttle ride into orbit; now he'd had to coordinate the release of the weapons, ammo, food, water, and medical supplies because of the delay.

"I know it may seem like a drastic measure for just a few hour's difference," Captain Kingston explained. "But I've seen this happen too many times: Covies see us packing up and they'll get you at the eleventh hour. Now, at least, we'll be prepared for anything."

Graham and I still placed our bets on nothing happening at all; the team at the OP had reported little activity in the alien camp for the past few days. Kingston, the lieutenant and I believed, was just a tiny bit paranoid.

Because of the release of supplies, the other two lieutenants and I were ordered to spend the rest of the day redistributing everything to our respective platoons. I didn't let my frustration show in front of my subordinates---bad discipline---but inside I felt it was just a waste of time. I ordered my platoon to store their supplies in whatever way they wished, and watch the line carefully. By the time it was all done, it was the evening of day four. Tomorrow we would leave.

I knew walking into the medical tent that night that there was a strong possibility I'd be scolded by Doc Reynolds; rank or not, he was still in charge when it came to medicine and healthcare. And I knew he'd have a definite problem with my not showing up at midday.

"Lieutenant---" he said when I walked in, tone indicating his disapproval. I held up my hands to stop him.

"I know, I know. Missed it."

"Let me ask you something, ma'am, with all due respect," he said, almost glaring. "Do you value your health, or not?"

"I most certainly do, Doc."

"Then why the hell, _ma'am_, would you jeopardize it in such a manner?"

I was so damn tired of people overreacting today. I snapped.

"Listen, Doc, I know you run this joint, but remember who the fuck you're talking to, huh? I missed one check. One."

The medic's jaw worked for a moment before he decided to back down. "Yes, ma'am. I apologize for any disrespectâ€|but I _am_ here to make sure my platoon members stay alive. All of them."

"Fair enough. I'm here now, so let's just get this over with." I sat on the cot, as usual.

"Roger, El-Tee."

The medic had removed the bandages on my ribs the day before, and found them to be healing well enough that I didn't need them checked daily anymore. The grenade blast from the first night patrol had only bruised my right side, so now the visit was left strictly to making sure the heat hadn't killed me yet.

"Getting ready for the changing of the guard, Lieutenant?" Reynolds asked, this time in a completely different tone.

"As ready as you can get with mister 'I've-got-a-funny-feeling' breathing down your neck," I answered. I hadn't realized how bitter I felt at Kingston's paranoia; I was glad we'd be heading to safer waters in several hours.

"Yep, that's the captain for ya," the medic replied with a smile. He looked up at me. "Well, as usual, you check out just fine."

"So all your bitching was for nothing then?" I asked, smirking.

It was the first time I'd seen Doc Reynolds blush, and it took all my self-control not to laugh. "Mostly," he admitted.

"At least tomorrow you'll only have to do these checks one last time," I said. "Then you're freed of me and everyone elseâ€|till we get wounded." I stood and turned to go. "Thanks, Doc."

"Uh, Lieutenant?"

"Yeah?"

"I realize how very inappropriate this is, but tomorrow we'll be on Sigma Octanus IV, with maybe a couple days' libertyâ€|"

"So?"

He took a deep breath. "So I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner with me."

Honestly, I was surprised. I could tell that Doc Reynolds had an interest in me, and he had probably figured out that he was attractive himself. But I hadn't thought that anything would come from it, especially not when we were still in a war zone and on-duty. It had "bad" written all over it.

When I'd finally regained speech some moments later, I sighed. "Listen, Doc, this is all wrong. We're professional soldiers in the middle of a war, and you wait for the right time and place for other stuff. This is neither."

"I know, ma'am. I know it's stupid to ask now and I know it could get me in trouble, but I just needed to find out. Butâ€|if I asked you when we get leave, would you consider saying yes?"

"First of all, the 'when' is actually an 'if.' Secondly, no. My dating years have been over for a long while now." I walked back to the desk he was sitting near and leaned my hands on it, making sure he could clearly see my wedding ring. I watched him look at it but couldn't decipher his expression.

"Point taken, El-Tee," he said after a pause. "I'll remind myself to never do this again."

I stood straight and glanced down at him; he looked like a scolded child, sitting in the chair with his hands in his lap.

I sighed and folded my arms across my chest, assuming the role of

undaunted leader once more. "You know we can't act weird now, right? The platoon's perceptive, and I've got a feeling they suspect something already."

"Yes, ma'am. No awkward moments."

An awkward silence followed.

Finally, I just grinned.

"If that was our first test, we failed miserably."

11. Chapter 10: The Moment We've Waited For

Author's Note: Finally reached chapter 10, and I hope you'll enjoy it! I just want to add as a small note to fatdude, I didn't steal your idea. ;-) I actually had up to chapter 25 written long before I put this story up on the site. Anyway, I'm now up to 32 chapters and getting closer to the beginning of the end. I hope everyone continues to R&R and have fun reading this!

* * *

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****Chapter Ten: The Moment We've All Been Waiting For****

It's hard to fall asleep in a hole in the sand when you're hot, sweaty, dirty, and hungry, but somehow "tired" beats out everything else. Within minutes of getting back to my foxhole, I was out in some dimension between wide-awake and deep sleep. In combat, I'd learned to get enough rest while still being subconsciously aware of any noise around me that might be out of place.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been asleep when I first heard the crackle over my radio. It started out as a fuzzy sound invading my dreamless oblivion, just some background buzz. Images of long-extinct bees floated around my head for a while before I slowly became alert.

"Lieutenant Cooper, this is OP One," a voice said through my helmet. "We've got Covies on approach! Repeat, we have been compromised!"

I shook my head a bit to clear it out. Had I heard right?

"Corporal Simmons? This is Lieutenant Cooper. Repeat your message and give me a situation report," I said, sitting up in the foxhole and picking up my rifle.

"Covies headed towards the OP, Lieutenant, and in huge numbers. I think they've spotted us, and we can't take 'em all. Request back-up ASAP."

Shit, not now that we were almost out of here, I thought.

"Reinforcements on the way, Corporal. Hold your position until then."

Does this attack look like they're heading for the lines?"

"Ma'am, there are tons of them, and they certainly don't need that many just to take out our observation post. This is the real deal."

"ETA to your position?"

"Minutes, El-Tee. We've got our machine gunner setting up now, but I'm not sure how long of a delay that'll cause."

"Standby."

I opened a platoon-wide channel.

"First platoon, this is Lieutenant Cooper. Listen carefully: OP is in danger of being overrun, and may be so by the time we get there. But we can't let the Covenant break through our lines, got it? We're going to move up to try to stop them at the post. We've gotta go rescue our Marines out there; I'll get second platoon to cover our six. Rally on me and let's go!"

Three minutes later, first platoon was surrounding me, ready to move out at my command, while second platoon was now positioned to cover us in case we weren't able to hold off the attack at the OP. This was it, what Willis had said to me on his message: Semper fi, do or die.

"First platoon, let's move it out," I said quietly into the platoon channel.

I kept my channel to the observation post open as I sprinted through the desert, my platoon members behind me. Of course, in case a bombardment began, the thirty of us were spaced out in the black of the night. But, now that we didn't have to worry about radio silence, and with all members having night-vision and area maps, there was no way to get lost.

Two minutes later we were scaling the desert rocks on the side of the OP, trying to get to the top where our four observers had been hidden. I was the first one starting up the jagged rocks, and I could hear the rattle of a machine gun and the occasional explosions as rocks melted when hit by boiling plasma.

It had been five minutes since the distress call sent by Corporal Simmons had reached me.

"Simmons, we're at the bottom of the rock formation. What's the situation?" I radioed, straining to hear the answer because the noise of the battle was getting louder and louder.

"Hurryâ€¦I'm trying to hold them off with the machine gunâ€¦everyone else is deadâ€¦Jesus, there's a lot of fucking blood, El-Teeâ€¦" the corporal responded.

The reply sent chills down my spine.

"First squad, on me! Second squad, get our six, and third squad, take one of our flanks," I ordered my platoon. To Simmons, I said, "Don't worry, Corporal, we've gotcha now."

A few seconds later, I reached the top of the rocks, along with Beesner and first squad. The air was hot with plasma and gunfire—the smell of the three torn-up Marines next to Simmons was suffocating.

"Am I glad to see you, Lieutenant!" Corporal Simmons shouted over the chaos. "I thought I was done for, just like my—my buddies. I've been gunning the aliens for a long time, but they just keep coming!"

"You still got ammo?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Then keep firing. You've got back-up now," I said. I switched channels. "First squad, let's get another gun set up a few yards away. Start rolling in the ordnance, too."

I ducked between the rocks and had Beesner follow me closer to the attacking alien horde. I unhooked two frag grenades from my belt and stuck one glowing blue plasma grenade to them. I counted two seconds, with my heart pounding in my ears, until I let the triple-threat loose on the oncoming group of Covenant.

"Get down!" I yelled at Beesner, who flattened himself behind a large rock. I held my helmet and waited as the heat wave from the explosion passed over us; debris rained and pinged off my helmet and armor plates. The battle was just getting underway.

"Yeah! That'll show 'em, El-Tee!" someone cried on the radio. I was too busy thinking of what to do next to read the ID on my helmet's screen.

"Third squad, flank 'em!" I bellowed into the COM channel, trying to keep the momentum going for our side. "Hit 'em with grenades, rifle fire, and machine gun them! Second squad! Cover our other flank!"

I'd realized now that since we were the forward line, there was no use covering the back if the Covies had easy access to our side; I decided it was best to keep all three squads on the main line of resistance.

Despite our efforts, the battle was quickly going in the aliens' favor. All three squads attacked from two sides and the front, giving it everything we had; it seemed, however, that the more Covenant we killed, the more would climb up the rocks and keep the attack going.

I was firing off my battle rifle so fast the barrel was beginning to heat up my hands, even through my gloves. I turned my scope to an Elite leading a group of assorted aliens up the jagged rocks, and I fired off two three-round bursts. The alien's torso was ripped open by my shredder rounds, splashing purple blood on his comrades as he fell backward. Still, the enemy kept coming.

Meanwhile, reports were coming over the radio about the wounded. Doc Reynolds, who was originally behind with second squad, had moved up with the team. He was busy juggling several patients, with more

coming in every so often.

Finally, just as we were starting to run out of ammo and grenades, the Covenant attack seemed to be letting up. Our combined counterattack, coming from three sides, had greatly diminished their numbers; the waves were slowly getting smaller and smaller.

"Snipers, you're clear to pick them off," I radioed, allowing the sharpshooters to do the rest of the work. Machine guns were getting silent now, with only occasional burps, and no more explosions echoed through the night.

It seemed to be all over until I saw something _whoosh_ at me.

The explosive needles missed me by mere millimeters, slicing through my combat trousers when they sped past my thigh. At first I was too busy staring down at my grazed leg to notice the end of the needles' path.

Piercing screams tend to remedy any problem with attention spans—especially when they come from right behind you.

"Lieutenant, the Covies are on the run! We beat 'em!" Corporal Simmons said over the COM channel, but my eyes were frozen to the scene that greeted me when I turned around.

I stared for a heartbeat before shrieking, "Medic!" at the top of my lungs.

Beesner's blood was spurting, bright red, from his right thigh.

I jumped on the young private's leg, immediately clamping both hands down over the wound. When I saw the leg from this close, blood spattering on my helmet and uniform, I nearly gagged.

The four needles that had only cut through my battledress had lodged themselves into Private Beesner's thigh, and exploded inside seconds later. The flesh on the private's wounded leg was torn and mangled, and the femur utterly shattered; splinters of bone and what looked like ground meat replaced his thigh.

"Bee, you with me?" I asked when I could speak again. I could feel the blood drain from my face, and I hoped I didn't look too shocked and worried to the private.

"Yeah, what happened?" Beesner asked weakly. He started propping himself up on his elbows and managed to see the wound before I could stop him. "Oh, God!" he yelled. "My leg!"

I pressed harder onto his thigh. Blood was seeping through my gloved fingers; I couldn't keep this up much longer. "It's ok, Bee. Don't freak out, I gotcha."

I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw a helmeted figure marked P02 REYNOLDS with a red cross symbol on my helmet's display. Help had finally arrived, and not a moment too soon.

"Doc, can you do something about this?" I asked him, realizing too

late the look of panic on Beesner's face at my question.

Reynolds shot me a look for my outburst and said, "Keep pressure on the leg till I tell you to let go, El-Tee." The medic then crouched beside me and put his hands over mine.

"Got it?" I said.

"You can let go."

"My leg! Oh, God, I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die---" Beesner shouted.

I ripped off my bloody gloves and helmet; the visor had so much blood on it I could no longer see. I knelt beside Beesner's head and grabbed his hand with my bare one. "We've got you, Bee, just hang on. You're not gonna die here, kid. Not on my watch."

The young private looked at me with an expression that read the most fear I'd ever seen on a person's face. Still, he nodded, reassured by my comment. I wasn't nearly as confident on the inside as I was on the outside, though.

As Doc Reynolds worked on the wound, Beesner was getting increasingly pale. His breathing was rapid and shallow; I didn't want to admit it to myself, but I knew he was dying.

"The femoral artery's cut," Petty Officer Reynolds said. "He's lost a load of blood, Lieutenant."

"I don't wanna die. I want to see my family. Mom! Where's my mom?"

Christ, he doesn't remember they're all dead, I thought. Doc gave me a look that said this was going downhill fast.

"Beesner? Hey, look at me!" I cried, willing him to turn his head. And, at the sound of my voice, he did. He looked me right in the eyes, pleading for his life.

"Lieutenantâ€¦" he started to say.

I squeezed his hand tighter, trying hard to keep my voice steady. "Listen to me, Beesner. You will _not_ die, understood?"

Reynolds was hard at work, but by now he realized it was a lost cause. Beesner was not going to live.

"Tell him, Doc. Tell him he's gonna make it." Even as I said it, I could feel Beesner loosening his grip on my hand. He was paler than ever, and his breathing was slow and weak. As the young private breathed his last, I turned and glared at Reynolds. "_Tell him_"

Doc Reynolds quit working on the leg and pressed a bloody hand to Private Beesner's neck. For some reason I still held out hope that he'd find a pulse, however weak, and revive my aideâ€¦and friend. Doc looked at me and shook his head.

"The kid's a goner, ma'am."

This time I was the one who gave Doc the pleading stare. We looked into each other's eyes for a moment before I felt rage build up inside me. I always felt anger before I felt grief.

I stood, stared down at all of Beesner's blood on me, and shouted, "Fuck!" I kicked my helmet and without thinking, grabbed my rifle with one hand and started running down the rocks. I was going to take on the entire Covenant army that was left; they had taken the last life from me.

"Lieutenant!" Doc Reynolds called after me, and I soon heard him scrambling down the rocks. I wasn't sure what the rest of the platoon was doing, but right now I didn't care. I was fueled by a deep hatred for the alien bastards that decided the lives of my father and my older sister Jenna and other comrades and buddies weren't enough; Beesner had to go, too. The promising young kid I had only met a few days ago, who had become a good friend, was now just another corpse.

I gritted my teeth when I made it to the bottom of the rocky formation, gripping my rifle tighter and intent on exacting revenge, all alone.

That is, until Reynolds' arms closed around my ankles and sent me crashing into the sand. I tried to get back up, but the six-foot, hundred sixty-five-pound medic had my feet firmly on the ground. I attempted to kick him but only managed to roll onto my back in the process, making it easier for Reynolds to keep me down. We wrestled for a while till he had me pinned.

"Get off me!" I yelled.

"No! Not so you can screw everything up by attacking the Covenant alone and getting killed!" the medic spat back.

"I swear to God, Reynolds, if you don't get the fuck off---!"

"Do you want join the kid? Leave your men without a leader? Again?"

I stopped struggling then, stunned by what he'd said. "Let me up. _Right_. _Now_."

He looked into my eyes for the second time, our faces nearly touching. I was so mad at him I could have pulled my combat knife on him, if only to scare him a bit.

Finally, the medic released me. He stood and extended his hand to help me to my feet, but I got up on my own. I brushed the sand from my uniform without success; Beesner's blood made some of the sand stick. I glared at Reynolds.

"I'll have you court-martialed for this," I said, and walked away.

The tears welling up in my eyes were hard to contain.

****Chapter Eleven: Feels Good to Vent****

Our relief showed up just five hours after the battle of the observation post ended. Had they arrived on time, Private James Beesner of Coral would have lived.

Was that right? If our relief had made it, they would have had to deal with the attack. Perhaps another young private, similar to Beesner, would have lost his or her life. Therefore, was it fair for me to wish that the kid were still alive? Even with the knowledge that maybe someone else would've had to die?

But it wouldn't have been one of my Marines, my aide, my friend. Maybe that was selfish, but that's the way I felt at the moment, standing on the deck of the transport ship that would take Bravo Company to Sigma Octanus IV.

We had won a key battle there on that rocky hill early this morning; my platoon and I had taken out quite a large force of Covenant by ourselves, and had kept the aliens from overrunning our lines. By all accounts, it was a great victory. Morale among the company, even the two platoons that hadn't been at the battle, was high, and Kingston had come to congratulate me. I had finally proven myself to my new combat group.

But at what cost?

I didn't see the battle as a victory, not really. I just did my job and held the line, and I ended up losing a friend in the process. On top of that, three other Marines had been killed, and five wounded. That, to me, was a failure.

The rest of first platoon was below decks, sleeping. After a nice, warm meal in the ship's mess, it had been hard for the war-weary troops to stay awake; in any case, they'd earned a break. I was the only one who hadn't eaten, and I couldn't make myself vulnerable to the nightmares by succumbing to sleep. Ergo, I was on the deck of the Rage Warrior, trying to sort out what had happened since my release from the hospital.

There's not a lot of time to think or reflect on things on the line. But there sure as hell was a lot of time now, and it was driving me nuts.

"Hey, kid, how're you holding up?"

I turned at the sound of the voice and found it was Lieutenant Graham.

"Huh?"

"I asked if you were doing ok," the other lieutenant repeated.

"Oh. Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." Unfortunately, my tone indicated anything but.

"Cooper."

"Hmm?"

She waved for me to follow her. "Come on."

Not sure where she was headed, I went with Lieutenant Graham down the corridor from where I'd been standing. "Graham? Where're we going?"

"I'm trying to teach you something, kid. Did you know I started out my career in the Marine Corps as enlisted?"

I blinked. "No. You get a battlefield commission?"

We walked into the mess hall, apparently the lieutenant's final destination. She fixed herself a coffee and poured another. "Sugar and cream?"

I shook my head. "Black no sugar."

She eyed me before handing me the cup.

"Sit," she said once we'd reached a table. I looked around; there were only a few scattered Marines and Navy crew in the mess, all pretty far from Graham and I.

Once seated, Lieutenant Graham pulled back the sleeve of her battledress jacket. Underneath, on her bare arm, was a long, jagged scar going from her wrist to her shoulder.

"Christ, why the hell didn't you get that removed?" I asked, cringing.

"This came from the battle where I won my gold bar." She pulled down her sleeve again and buttoned the cuff. "In that same battle, I lost my husband and my two kids."

Something happened to her eyes as she spoke. "The scar keeps my memory fresh, but its not like I can forget anyway."

"God, I'mâ€¦I'm really sorry. I didn't---"

"I read your file, kid. You've got a lot of potential, and a lot of accomplishments already. But one thing you don't have yet is wisdom of old age." She took a sip of the steaming coffee and continued. "I'm forty-eight years old and I've been fighting Covenant since way before you were even born. I've been a follower and a leader, a wife and a mother, a soldier and an officer. I've had men die on me and I've saved plenty more. You know what I've learned?"

I shook my head, thinking how horrible Graham's life must've been.

"You have to take things as they come. You have to accept that in life, you'll win some and lose some, you'll have good times and absolutely shitty times. As long as you know you did all that you couldâ€¦" She trailed off and shrugged. "At the end of the day, that's what matters."

I nodded, not sure I understood what she said. I thought that, somehow, I could have done more to keep Beesner alive. I could have done more to protect my platoon or the three Marines with Corporal

Simmons, now dead.

"You're thinking about your aide? How you could've saved him?"

"Yeah," I said quietly.

Lieutenant Graham put a comforting arm around my shoulder. "I won't lie to you, Cooper. It'll hurt, and you'll feel guilty. But you did all you could, and you saved the line, the company, and won the battle." Graham got up from her seat and tossed her empty cup in the trash. "Chin up, kid. Life hasn't even tested you yet. Have some chow."

She started to walk away, but then hesitated and turned around. "Natalie?"

I looked up.

Her face contorted in a painful expression, but Lieutenant Graham managed to say, "Thank God every day for your man and your little boy." Then she left the mess hall.

I sat there, staring blankly at the space the other lieutenant had just vacated; the brief conversation had left my head reeling. I had no idea how incredibly awful Graham's loss must have been, but I wasn't so sure I entirely agreed with her. I believed in change, and I also believed that you could learn from your mistakes to make better choices the next time. I would grieve for my buddy, and feel bad for the death of the other three Marines. But I would use that grief and anger, along with the memory of my former platoon, to kick the Covies' ass again at our next meeting.

And this time, I'd bring all my Marines back alive.

13. Chapter 12: More Mess Hall Therapy

Author's Note: Yeah, I know UNSC ships aren't nearly as fast as I'm making them out to be. But for the sake of the story, I'm going to ignore that fact and move things along. Hope you like it and, as always, please R&R.

****Chapter Twelve: More Mess Hall Therapy****

The trip to Sigma Octanus IV took six days. In that time, the troops were allowed a rest period of forty-eight hours; after that, it was back to training and PT. At least we got real food, beds, and showers, all items of luxury for us ground troops.

I started sleeping and eating sometime after training began; I found that I needed to put fuel in my body in order to function at my level of fitness. I still remembered the gory details of that morning at the OP vividly, but I found that I was no longer losing myself in the memories. I even managed to sleep most shifts without nightmares.

But the death of Beesner was still fresh and raw, and it would take time to fully heal from the psychological and emotional trauma.

I needed Willis.

The prospect of seeing my husband anytime soon was slim to none; the average time apart for military couples nowadays was two and a half to three years. It had only been a little over half a year for Willis and I, so there was a long way to go.

I missed him so much it was hard to bear sometimesâ€|especially now.

Presently, I was pulling my socks on while sitting on my bunk; officers were two per room, and my roommate was currently rotated on duty. Her shift had almost come to an end and I was to relieve her in fifteen minutes. I yawned and stretched, wishing I could have had more sleep but glad I'd at least been able to take a shower.

There was a knock on the door.

Figuring it might be my roommate coming back early, I said, "Come in!"

The door opened but no one entered. Instead, the figure remained in the doorway, casting a shadow from the light in the hall.

"What do you want?" I inquired, pulling roughly on my other sock.

"I'm sorry for what I did, Lieutenant. I was way out of line, and it wasn't my place to tell you what to do."

I snorted. "You think?"

"Yes, ma'am. I screwed up."

"Have you noticed how many times you've had to apologize to me the past couple weeks, Petty Officer?" I started putting on my light duty combat boots.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And I'm choosing to ignore the fact that you tried hitting on me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I laced up my boots and stood, facing him for the first time.

"Then you're either really stupid or really brave to come here." I could tell he was trying hard to keep his expression neutral, but he was failing. He looked rather dejected.

Doc Reynolds eased himself out of the doorway and back into the hall a bit. "I, uh, I'm sorry for bothering you, Lieutenant." He turned and started walking away.

Christ, I thought, mentally shaking my head as I grabbed my silenced pistol and belt.

"Doc?"

He'd already made it to the end of the corridor, but somehow he heard and turned around.

I jogged up to him, still trying to put my belt on with one hand and holding my pistol in the other.

"What? You gonna kill me?" Reynolds asked. He pretended he was being serious, but his grin gave him away. "Kidding, El-Tee."

I gave him a small shove. "You're an idiot, you know that?" I finally managed to holster my pistol, and I looked at my watch. "I've got ten minutes until I go back on duty. Are you off or just begging to be placed in a brig?"

"Definitely the former. I thought you were already putting me up for court-martial?"

I stopped walking and faced him, dead serious. "Don't push me, Doc. I'll do it in a heartbeat if you make me." I sighed and continued walking. "But, after much reflection, I think you were right. If you hadn't stopped me, I'd just be another bagged and tagged body right now. So thanks."

"That's what the medic's for, Lieutenant. Saving his troops---and that includes his headstrong yet talented lieutenant."

I gave Reynolds an amused look. "You know compliments aren't going to make the ring go away, right?"

The medic looked embarrassed. "Thatâ€¦umâ€¦I wasn't trying---" Reynolds ran a hand across his cropped black hair.

"Let's go to the mess. I need some chow before training starts."

"Ok."

We walked into the mess hall and I stopped in front of the nearest food dispenser. Shipboard time said it was morning, so the selections were all breakfast items. I figured you couldn't go wrong with scrambled eggs and sausage; I pressed the button and a hot, steamy plate emerged from the machine.

I went to the drink dispenser and got a cup of strong coffee as the medic made his food selection. We sat at a rather vacant table; the situation was much like the one I'd been in the first day with Lieutenant Graham. Finally, I had a relatively private spot to talk to Petty Officer Reynolds.

"I've been thinking a lot about the kid lately," I confessed after downing a forkful of eggs.

"Hard to forget something like that," Reynolds commented, biting into his breakfast burrito.

"It's justâ€¦I had my hands clamping down on his leg. You showed up on-scene fast. It seems like we did everything right but he'sâ€¦he's still dead."

"Why are you so stuck on him?" the medic asked.

I thought about the question as I eyed my food without eating. I had suddenly lost my appetite. "I don't know. I always think about the Marines I've lost under my command, or awful events I've witnessed. Thisâ€combines both. It's hard to get the image and feeling of someone's blood splattering all over you out of your head."

"I know how you feel. I have that happen with nearly all my patients."

I immediately felt dumb. "Sorry, I forgot about that. We both see scary stuff a lot, but you've got to actually figure out how to fix it more often than I do. Beesner was a rare case."

"It's ok."

I pushed my rather untouched breakfast into the trash and drank my coffee. I was debating whether or not to tell the petty officer that, beyond the usual reasons, I kept thinking about Beesner because of Gabriel. What if that had been my own son? Granted, Beesner's mother had been killed before he was, but I just couldn't get the look of panic, shock, and fear on that young face out of my memories.

Explaining all this to the petty officer, however, meant telling him about Gabe, and I wasn't sure I was comfortable giving the medic such personal details. He was my friend but I also knew he wanted more; the medic was attractive, but my own interest did not go beyond a platonic relationship. I just wanted Willis back.

I sighed. Everything was always so damn complicated.

"Graham gave me a talk about it," I said, focusing on a different aspect of the topic.

Petty Officer Reynolds laughed. "That woman's definitely got some interesting insights. I mean, she's right about a lot of stuff, and she's got more experience than both of us combined, butâ€" The medic shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I'm just not the 'roll over and play dead' kind of guy."

I smiled. "Exactly what I was thinking."

"Yeah. But you gotta think of everything she's been through, too. Family wiped out in one battle? That's fucking rough, if you ask me."

I finished my coffee and glanced at the now-empty cup. "There's a lot of that going around."

Doc Reynolds cocked an eyebrow at me. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"The kid," I whispered.

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"Poor little bastard." Reynolds finished eating and threw his plate in the trash, along with his cup of coffee. He'd been sitting across

from me, but now he came up behind me and whispered in my ear, "Don't worry, El-Tee. Shit happens. You'll be all right."

I stood to face him, and he smiled at me. "I saw you out there, Lieutenant. You're a good leader and a good Marine. Don't doubt yourself, 'cause even the best lose some."

"Thanks, Reynolds. I appreciate that."

And with that, our conversation concluded. My ten minutes were up and it was back to duty.

14. Chapter 13: Dreams Aren't the Same

Author's Note: So, this story now has over 1000 hits! Yay! But where's the reviews? If you've been reading this story, I'd really love to know how I'm doing. I appreciate those of you who have reviewed so far, and I enjoy the feedback. Big thanks to reviewers, and I hope the covert readers leave some reviews in the future. Thanks for reading and hope you enjoy! Peace!

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>Chapter Thirteen: Dreams Aren't What They Used to Be

"Ok, Cooper. Move it on up. Let's see what's in there."

"Moving, sir. First platoon, hold steady."

I walked up to the door of the shop in a crouch, keeping my MA5B assault rifle to bear. The weapon was huge but didn't weigh nearly as much as it looked, and unlike the battle rifle, it had no scope; the MA5B was purely for up close and personal bullet hosing.

I leaned against the door once I reached it, and held my breath as I strained to listen. Inside the shop, with my helmet's volume amplified, I could hear alien voices murmuring to each other. I stepped back and motioned for Corporal Dandh, behind me, to move up.

"I'm going to kick open the door on three. Toss a grenade and cover me," I ordered, whispering.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Cooper, get that shop cleared yet?" Captain Kingston asked through another channel.

"No, sir. Working on it, Captain."

I took a deep breath and began counting aloud for Dandh. "Three, two, one—"

Bam!

I kicked open the door of the small store with my dark gray, freshly polished combat boots. I stepped just outside the frame on the street

side as the corporal threw a frag into the main floor. My head rattled inside my helmet as the grenade exploded, and then I stormed into the still-smoky room. Using my motion tracker, and in a crouched position to make a smaller target, I took out four screaming Grunts in the first thirty seconds. I wasn't breathing, I wasn't blinking, I wasn't thinking; it was all mechanical and automatic. Point and shoot, point and shoot, dodge that bolt!, point and shoot.

Three more alien bodies---two Jackals and an Elite---were down by the time the smoke and debris cleared the air. The store appeared to have no more enemies inside, although the blown up bits of furniture that covered the area could have easily hid a clever Covie bastard. I took out my silenced pistol and began walking through the wreckage, half-expecting to get pumped full of plasma by a hidden alien. I checked my motion tracker as my heart rate gradually increased, but the tracker saw nothing out of place.

So why did I have this feeling of an ambush tingling at the back of my cervical spine?

"Dandh," I breathed, barely even a whisper. I could feel eyes on me, and it was utterly unnerving.

What was going on? Was I losing my nerve? Had five years of long, weary, and painful combat finally gotten to me?

Or was there really a threat in this place that only I could detect?

"Got your six, ma'am. No enemies anywhere near you," Corporal Dandh's voice said over my helmet.

"Iâ€|"

Close your eyes, suck in some air, and do your job, my brain said suddenly, harshly. I obeyed, but even so, I noticed that my pistol hand was shaking.

"What the hell is going on here?" I demanded to no one in particular.

"Lieutenant? Aren't you going to contact Kingston? The building's secure," my subordinate said.

There was an odd sound behind me, like a predator licking its chops when it spotted an injured prey. An easy meal.

It took all my will power not to shriek, but before I could turn around I was in somebody's---or something's---chokehold. I struggled with whatever it was, feeling its hot breath on the back of my neck as I tried helplessly to disentangle myself from its arms, the two weapons in my hands, and the broken furniture at my feet.

"Filthy human scum," the camouflaged Elite spat in my ear.

I heard a sharp crack as my neck twisted unnaturally and my world went black.

Author's Note: Thanks for the reviews! Feedback is always very much appreciated, so please continue. Oh, and don't worry, I've got plenty of ideas for the story. ;-) Anyway, since Ch. 13 & 14 are short, I decided to put up both. Enjoy, R&R, and peace!

P.S. Moved the time-and-date heading to this chapter. I thought it didn't make sense for it to be in the last one, since Ch. 13 was a dream.

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Chapter Fourteen: Back to a Boring Base

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**1545 Hours, January 28, 2552. Europa Base, City of Cote D'Azur.
"The Calm Before the Storm," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. Prologue to
Battle of Sigma Octanus IV**

It was always eerie to wake up in the middle of the night, drenched in your own sweat and shivering from a weird nightmare. The feeling was no less true in the daylight hours. At first I just lay there a while in my bed, staring intently at the ceiling and then the room to make sure everything was ok. I was in my quarters on Europa Base, trying to enjoy a moment's rest before heading back to simulated training with my platoon.

Except that for some reason, even a moment's rest always transformed into a restless moment.

Maybe all those simulations are combining in my subconscious with my deepest anxieties to form bad dreams, I thought._ Or it could mean that sometime in the future, when I'm busting down shop doors looking for Covies to kill, I'm going to get my neck snapped by an Elite. Either way, it sucks._

There was only one thing to be thankful for: the nightmares were finally excluding Beesner's broken and bloody body.

When I realized there was no way I'd fall asleep again, I sighed at the missed opportunity and pushed the covers back. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, yawned, and rubbed my burning eyes. Life in uniform meant a lot of hours spent away from a nice lovely bed.

Wearing only a gray UNSC-MC T-shirt and underwear as I slept, I was almost finished getting dressed when someone knocked on my door.

"Cooper? Beauty sleep time's over, kid. Get your lazy ass in gear, we've got a sim to run in fifteen minutes."

It was Graham.

"I'm _so_ not ready for this right now," I muttered as I strapped on

my gloves. I picked up my helmet and opened the door.

"What'd you say?" Graham asked, a puzzled look on her face.

"Nothin', El-Tee. Let's get going before Kingston pops a vein and Smythe uses the opportunity to talk shit about me."

Lieutenant Graham laughed as I picked up my battle rifle and silenced pistol.

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"Finally, no more sims and no more cares," Graham said when we'd finished training three hours later.

"Yeah," I said sadly. "Just mountains upon mountains of paperwork to do." I rolled my eyes. "Does Intelligence really believe I'll remember something useful to them from the last firefight I was in?" I paused, thinking. "I could tell them the exact color and feeling and temperature of Private Beesner's blood, but not so much about enemy troop strength."

Lieutenant Tracey Graham put her hand on my shoulder. "Hey, kid, think about what I said. And maybe consider honoring that other kid with a citation. I'm sure it would make you feel better."

"I don't know. Graham, if I give Bee a medal, who the hell's gonna receive it? His entire family was wiped out. Honestly, the more I think about it, the more just Beesner's death seems to be." Even though it still tore me up inside. Poor Beesner.

"I'm just making suggestions, Cooper. You've got to find your own way to deal with this. Just make sure you do actually deal with it and not just ignore the issue. Faster you heal, faster you'll be that much more valuable to your current crop of Marines. Remember that."

I looked at her for a moment, then nodded silently. She gave my shoulder a pat and walked off.

Well, it's time to hit the paperwork, I thought, sighing.

16. Chapter 15: Learning to Pay Attention

****Chapter Fifteen: Learning to Pay Attention****

A week later, I was still working on documents from both the Heathan forest campaign and the desert. Physical training and simulated platoon maneuvers occupied my mornings, while deskwork made up the rest of the day. By now, my job on base was getting so mundane I actually hoped for a new deployment sometime soon.

I was sitting in my office, bored of pushing papers, when my aide came through the door. Corporal Kaleb Garian was twenty-one years old and hailed from one of the besieged Outer Colony worlds. Practically raised in the thick of battle, the black-haired, green-eyed corporal had a quiet toughness and determination about him that impressed

me.

Knowing he'd probably come in with the supply inventory Kingston had requested, I didn't think much of Garian's visit at first.

"Lieutenant Cooper?" he asked.

"What is it, Corporal?" I said without looking up. I was reading over some service records of the men and women in my platoon, trying to decide whom I would recommend for a medal.

"Ma'am, there's a Lieutenant Hawk here to see you."

"Send him in." I didn't really register what he'd said, as I was busy reading Corporal Trevor Dandh's file. Turns out he was a decorated veteran of the Oasha campaign. Interesting.

Corporal Garian left the room, and the man who'd entered cleared his throat.

"One moment, Lieutenant," I said, again focusing my attention on the records rather than the person standing in front of my desk. Technically, we were both the same rank, but the lieutenant was in my office. He'd simply have to wait his turn.

"Very well, Lieutenant," the voice said.

For a moment I didn't even trust my own hearing. I knew that voice anywhere, and now that I thought about it, my aide had said the name Hawk. Couldn't be him, though, I reasoned. He was on Rondurass, doing flight training for his next mission.

I looked up.

Standing there was Willis, grinning ear to ear.

I barely kept my composure. Discipline, discipline, discipline—ah, screw that. I hadn't seen my husband in months. If that wasn't torture, I didn't know what was.

"Surprise," Willis said.

I actually chuckled.

"How did you know I was here, Will? We just arrived about a week ago," were the first intelligent words that came out of my mouth.

"What can I say? Good to have friends in high places."

We looked at one another for a good minute, just grinning like a couple of morons. I realized how ridiculous it was, but I didn't care. Finally, I got up from behind my desk and all but ran at him.

Willis gave me a giant bear hug and what must have been the longest lasting kiss in human history.

"It's good to see you," I said when I could breathe again.

"I've missed you so much, Coop," Willis said, releasing me. "I got a letter chip over three weeks ago, said you were in the hospitalâ€|"

"I'm all right, Will," I assured him.

"I heard you were in ICU for more than a month. You sure about that?"

"Bumps and bruises don't keep me down. Besides, see me standing here talking to you?"

"Yeahâ€|"

"Well, then, _someone_ saw it fit for me to leave the hospital."

Willis leaned against the wall and eyed me with mock suspicion. "How do I know you didn't just break out?"

"And what, float planetside? It was an orbital facility."

"Ah." Willis looked down at his boots, then back at me. "So when are you done for the day?"

"Another fifteen minutes. Why? Are you going to take me somewhere?"

Willis winked at me. "You'll see."

"You think you're getting away with an answer like that?" I asked, giving him an evil sort of grin and pressing against him. After all the time we'd spent apart, it felt really good to have his body close to mine again.

He shut his gorgeous golden brown eyes for a moment and rasped, "C-Cooper, if this is your way of trying to suppress my raging hormones, you're doing a horrible job of it."

When I started laughing, my husband smiled weakly. "It _has_ been seven very lonely months, Coop â€|" He slid his arms around my waist and leaned in for a kiss, but I stopped him.

"I know. But we can't afford to get caught in my office," I said, amazed at the nonchalance in my voice. I ran a hand over the side of his short, light brown hair and finally stepped back.

Separating myself from Willis took all the self-control I could muster; the last thing I wanted to do was let go of him. But I knew the regulations---and, of course, there was the problem of Corporal Garian, who was sitting right outside.

Willis stared at me with a look of disappointment. "All this teasing is killing me, honey. Do you have any idea what that does to my pride?" he asked. He was trying to sound serious, but his faint grin gave him away.

I sat back down behind my desk, grateful for the physical barrier between us; I didn't exactly trust myself at the moment. "Gotta

follow the rules, Will. So, are you going to tell me where we're going _now_?"

"Well, shit, with persuasion like thatâ€¦"

Our eyes met and I gave him my best pitiful look. He held my gaze only a few moments before giving in.

"Oh, all right. This was supposed to be a surprise, thoughâ€¦"

"That's ok. You showing up here was unexpected enough, anyway."

"TouchÃ©." Willis cleared his throat loudly and assumed an air of sophistication. "Tonight, my dear, we are scheduled to dine at La Rosa Bianca, the finest restaurant operating within Sigma Octanus space. Following said dinner, we shall take a lovely stroll alongside the crystal-clear Lumiar River." Willis paused for effect, then continued in his normal tone of voice, "And, for the grand finale, I've booked us a room at the luxurious Galaxy Stars. How's that sound?"

"Iâ€¦I think my fifteen minutes are up."

17. Chapter 16: A Moment's Respite

Author's Note: Just a progress update. ;-) I've been working hard to finish this story before my classes resume, and I recently started Chapter 39 (out of 48). I should be updating more frequently now since most of the chapters are done, so keep an eye out. Enjoy and please don't forget to R&R! Reviews are always appreciated and loved. Peace.

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****Chapter Sixteen: A Moment's Respite****

Sometimes in life, even in the midst of a nasty war for human survival, good things can happen. I'd spent months in a charred and battle-torn forest, thirty-plus days in an intensive care unit on an orbital hospital, and a harsh week in a boiling desert. And yet, despite everything that happened, I'd managed to finally find happiness again.

I had Willis back for twenty-four blissful hours, and nearly a year and a half early, too.

"So? You going to tell me how you were wounded on Heath?" Willis asked quietly as we walked from my office on Europa Base to the restaurant across town. It was a long walk, to be sure, but we were two young and very fit Marines; to us, the walk was nothing more than routine.

As soon as my husband asked the question, I shook my head involuntarily. I didn't want to ruin our time with thoughts of all I'd seen on Heath, most of which I wanted desperately to

forget.

Before I even articulated this to Willis, he seemed to perceive my hesitation and reach the correct conclusion.

"Right," he said. "No war talk." He lifted his head to the sky, no doubt rebuking himself for bringing it up. "Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize, Will. I promise we'll talk about it tomorrow."

Willis looked at me, half-surprised and half-admiring. He finally smiled and used his arm, which was around my shoulders, to pull me closer. He kissed me and said, "I don't know how I made out on Rondurass without you, Coop."

I cocked an eyebrow at him, one corner of my mouth curling into a smirk. "You better not have 'made out' on Rondurass without me."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Cooper," Willis said. Then, lowering his voice and grinning, he added, "Though I did have some very pleasant dreams about you."

"Dream no more, honey. I'm right here now."

Willis smiled. "And I'm thankful for that."

We walked several blocks without saying anything, simply enjoying each other's company instead. It was great to have him back, even if only for a short period. When the restaurant was in sight, Willis spoke again.

"How's Gabe doing, Natalie? Any updates from Mrs. Cooper?"

"Got a letchip a few weeks ago. ONI sent Mom to St. Louis," I answered.

"Earth?"

"Yep."

"Man, he's lucky. First time I went to Earth was when I got stationed there a year ago on rotated defense duty." Willis snorted. "What a joke. The Covies don't even know its location."

Little did either of us know, that fact would soon change in the months to come.

"I miss him, Will," I said quietly. "I miss him a lot."

My husband gave my shoulder a squeeze. "I know, Coop. I miss him, too. Terribly. We just have to hang in there until this crappy war is over."

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"That," I said, putting down my fork at last, "was some of the best chow I've ever had in my life, I think."

Willis put a hand to his belly. "I think I ate enough food for four people. I thought going days without chow would give you a larger stomach capacity later, but I guess not."

"Well, even if you develop a huge ass, I'll still love you," I quipped, trying hard not to laugh. I failed.

"Thanks, honey. I'm sure what you said makes a lot of sense, seeing as I'm a six-foot-one, hundred fifty-five pound male. If anything, I am borderline malnourished."

I patted his hand. "Don't get your boxers in a bunch. The very fact that you're a lean mean flyin' machine makes me that much more of a comedic genius."

"Uh-huh." Willis grinned at me for a moment, then asked, "Shall we?"

"Yeah. I've never seen the Lumiar River at night."

Lucky for us, La Rosa Bianca sat right on part of the river; all Willis and I had to do was step outside the restaurant to walk along the riverbank. The Lumiar stretched for miles, as it was one of Sigma Octanus IV's biggest rivers, and my husband and I made full use of that distance. Really more of a night hike, our walk took us far from the place we dined, but we didn't care. Lost in conversation, distance and time seemed to flow together and move slowly.

Finally, we realized that we'd been hiking for over two hours. It was late into the warm night and all would have been covered in darkness if it weren't for the huge, beautiful full moon looming above. Willis pulled a compact packet out of one of his pockets and from the card-sized plastic produced a large blanket. He spread it out a few yards from the river's edge, and we sat down.

I leaned my head against his shoulder as he moved closer to put his arm around me. Not for the first time, I wondered what I would do without him.

"Natalie?"

"Hmm?"

"I don't want to wait anymore."

"For what?"

He sighed and took a deep breath. I wondered what he was going to say; he seemed nervous, which was out of character for him.

"I know you really wanted to do it in a church, and that a big family and friends ceremony has always meant a lot to you. But with this war, we've only seen each other three times since we were married by a judge. And that was almost five years ago. I know we wanted this done then, but with our combat missions and deployments on distant planetsâ€¦"

"Will, what in God's name are you talking about?" I asked, genuinely confused.

He looked at me, his face close to mine. "Natalie, I justâ€¦We should have the real wedding we've always wanted. I think we've been forced to wait long enough." He smiled at me, his features bright in the moonlight. "So what do you say?"

I laughed. "We've been through this before, remember? I already said yes. I don't care about a big event anymore, Will. We're married, and that's what matters."

"All the same, I promise you, the moment the war's over, we're getting the whole shebang."

"Well, we'll definitely have accumulated _a lot_ of combat pay."

Willis smirked. "What, there's not enough shopping for you to do around here?"

I gave him a look. "You kidding? My latest fashions include 'dirty-and-torn black combat uniform', 'bloodstained-and-charred gray combat uniform', and 'smells-like-really-strong-detergent garrison uniform', which I am currently modeling."

"Natalie, you always look gorgeous, no matter what," my husband whispered in my ear.

Smirking, I raised an eyebrow at him. "You're trying real hard, aren't you?"

Willis grinned. "Is it working?"

I leaned in close to his face. "Maybe."

The banter was halted indefinitely after that. Willis wrapped his arms around me and we started kissing. It wasn't long before our jackets and boots were tossed by the wayside.

He laid me down on the blanket, and he kissed my neck as I slipped my hands under his shirt. I pulled the garment up and over his head and started undoing his fly. While I fumbled with two buttons and a zipper, Willis lifted my shirt off and slid his hands to my bra strap.

"Stupidâ€¦womanâ€¦contraptions," Willis muttered, breathing heavy.

"Pantsâ€¦aren't...easy, either," I managed to say.

We both laughed.

As Willis moved on to my uniform trousers, he brushed his lips against my ear and whispered, "Natalieâ€¦"

18. Chapter 17: Rumors and Reality Don't Mix

****Chapter Seventeen: Rumors and Reality Don't Mix****

"Natalie? Wake up, Coop. We should get going."

"Will, what do I always tell you about waking me up?" I asked sleepily, my voice muffled from lying on my stomach.

"That you're going to hurt me one of these days?"

"Exactly," I answered. "So what could possibly possess you to do such a thing?"

"We kind of need to get to the hotel."

I sighed, knowing he was right. My eyes finally opened and I glanced up, rolling onto my side. "Will?"

"That's me," he said. He stood there looking down at me, wearing only his boxers and a goofy grin. Even in the moonlight, his athletic and muscular frame was a sight to behold.

"How long were we out?" I asked, sitting up.

He shrugged. "I dunno. I woke up by chance a few minutes ago, and realized we should probably head back before someone sees us here."

"Good idea."

We dressed mostly in silence, wrapped up the blanket, and started back the way we'd come from. It was still dark out, and the late night warmth had now given way to cool early morning. A fog rolled lazily through the tops of the trees, and there was dew on the grass under our boots.

"This is sort of creepy, don't you think?" I asked Willis, taking in the eerie landscape.

"Are you kidding? Remember, Natalie, I've seen you with a gun. That's far more frightening than any foggy forest."

I smiled in the dark and gave him a playful shove. "You're such an asshole."

"A fact that didn't seem to bother you earlier," Willis replied, grinning. He came to a halt and kissed me. "You were incredible, by the way."

"Right back atcha, Mister," I said with a smirk.

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We got to the Galaxy Stars hotel an hour and a half later, as it was closer than the restaurant where we'd begun our night hike. Once there, we hardly even noticed the immaculate white and gray sheets, covered by a soft red comforter. Barely pausing to remove even our boots, we both fell asleep before our heads hit the oversized white pillows.

I knew I was in deep trouble the next day (or, rather, much later in the same day) when I awoke to the sound of my datapad ringing. When I

looked at the time, I saw that I was frightfully late for work.

"Lieutenant Cooper here," I answered, preparing for the worst.

"Cooper? This is Lieutenant Graham. I want you to know that I covered for you, and managed to convince Kingston that you needed the day off to recuperate from your sore rib wound. You know, all that intense training we've been doing the past weekâ€¦"

"Y-yes, of course," I said, playing along. "How, um, did you know he was here, Graham?"

"You know how fast scuttlebutt travels, Cooper. Your aide noticed a particular change in your demeanor, a 'bounce' in your step, and so dutifully reported it to my aide, who told Smythe's aidâ€¦"

"I see." Now that Smythe knew Willis was here, he was sure to come up with a sneaky way to ruin things for me. "Well, geez, Graham, thanks. I'll owe you one, I guess."

"No problem, kid. Enjoy your day, because tomorrow isn't going to be any different from the usual. Graham out."

"Who was that?" Willis mumbled, apparently now awake.

"Another lieutenant in my platoon," I said, turning to face him. "She's saving my ass."

"I told you it's good to have friends in high places. What time is it?"

"Two forty. In the afternoon. Can't say we didn't get much sleep."

"Soâ€¦" Willis began, propping himself up on an elbow. With our faces just inches apart, he grinned at me.

"So what?" I asked, grinning back.

"I was wondering---" he said, sliding his hand to the small of my back and pulling me closer.

"Uh-huh?"

"---if maybe---" he continued, starting to kiss me.

"What?"

"---we had some extra time---"

"For?"

"---for...an encore...of last night," Willis said between kisses. He started laughing, and I couldn't help but join in.

"You are seriously lacking in the art of subtlety, Will."

"All part of my charm. So should I take that as a yes?"

I flashed a mischievous smile at him, and let my actions answer for me.

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Eventually, we finally got around to actually leaving the hotel room. We both showered and dressed, and Willis shaved as I did my hair and make-up. Finally, we were ready to go into the city in search of food.

"I know a good place that's not far from here," Willis said as we walked hand-in-hand along the downtown area. Now that we were wearing civilian clothing, restrictions on public displays of affection weren't a problem.

"How do you know Cote D'Azur so well?" I asked him.

"I do my homework?"

I gave him a look. "Try again."

"I visited recently as part of the prototype testing program I was in on Rondurass," he finally answered.

"That makes about as much sense as what you said before, honey."

"I'll explain after we eat. Although I'm warning you now, I can't talk about everything."

"Fair enough."

Just before we went into the diner Willis had mentioned, he stopped to give me a passionate kiss.

"I love you," he said.

I smiled and kissed him back. "I love you, too."

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"All right, I'm ready to hear about Rondurass," I said when we'd finished eating. The plates were gone from the table, and the tab was paid.

"Well, I told you before: there's not a whole lot I can say," Willis began, leaning back in his seat. "We've flown a few covert missions here and there, but we really haven't seen that much action the past several months. We mostly test out these new prototypes."

"What kind of covert missions are you guys doing?"

"I'm sorry, Coop. I'm not allowed to tell you that."

"I kind of figured. Anything you can tell me about those new birds you're flying?"

"They're supposed to be released within the year for use in the UNSC Marine Corps and the ODST outfit. For now, we're testing the ones that are going to hit the market first."

"That sounds interesting," I said. "Have you performed any of your covert ops with the new planes?"

Willis thought for a moment, probably deciding what he could and couldn't say. "Some."

"I bet you guys tested these newbies a lot with sims before flying them, huh?"

"Honestly? Not a whole lot."

I thought for a moment, confused by his answer. "Seems what you're telling me is that you fly ships to see that they don't malfunction."

"Yes."

"So if they do have a fatal flaw, you won't know until it's too late."

Willis seemed amused. "I'm a good pilot, Cooper."

"No, you're a great pilot. But we both know that wings don't matter if the bird can't fly."

"Natalie, these ships are safe. They're going to be distributed within the year, like I said, to the majority of the military."

I nodded slowly and sighed. "I'm just worried about you."

He smiled. "Don't. Soon everyone will be flying these, you'll see. What my squadron and I are doing is really just making triple-checks."

I looked my husband in the eyes, letting him know I wasn't convinced. "Please, Will. Be careful."

"Always am," Willis replied with a wink. He reached across the table and drank from the glass of water there. "Ok, your turn. I did my speech about Rondurass, and now I get to hear about Heath."

"Yeah, Cooper. Why don't you tell Hubby what really happened on Heath?" a voice said from behind us.

"Smythe," I growled.

"Who?" Willis asked.

"The third and last lieutenant in my company. And a really big pain in the ass," I managed to say before Smythe came to our table.

"So how are things going, Cooper?" Lieutenant Smythe asked, grinning evilly.

"Great. Until you showed up," I replied bitterly.

"How're those sore ribs?"

"Oh, you know. Still sore."

"Yeah, but I bet that's not from the battle." Smythe let out a spine-tingling laugh.

"Who are you?" Willis interjected.

"Of course. I apologize for not introducing myself. I'm Lieutenant Jon Smythe, and I run third platoon in Bravo Company. And you areâ€|?"

"Lieutenant William Hawk," Willis answered.

"May I call you Billy?"

"Willis is fine," my husband answered, slightly annoyed. He hated the name Billy, or even Bill. Only his parents ever called him William, and only a select few could call him Will. To everyone else, he was just plain Willis.

"'Course, Billy. So would you like to know the real story behind the Heath campaign? Something that perhaps Lieutenant Cooper here is reluctant to divulge?"

"Actually, I just wanted to hear what---"

"Well, I was there, I could tell you." Smythe leaned on our table and lowered his voice. "It was hot there in the desert, real hot. But you know the Corps. Nothing's hotter than rumors. And there was a good one going around that seems to have had a strong possibility of being true."

"Is this something about the war?" Willis asked.

"Smythe, can't you leave? Just this once?" I said. But my words fell on deaf ears.

"See that man sitting there on the counter, flyboy? Checkin' out his datapad and drinking a mug of joe? That's Lieutenant Cooper's platoon medic."

Oh, God, I think I know where this is going, I thought suddenly.

"So?" Willis said.

"So? People say that wife of yours spent a large amount of time in the medical tent---"

"Smythe, you little piece of---"

"---and he's a medic. He's allowed to do all that touchy-feely stuff without raising any questions. And when we boarded our ship to come to Sigma Octanus---"

"Smythe!"

"---she was seen with him several times in the mess, in the medical bay, and even in her own quartersâ€|"

"That's a fucking lie!" I shouted, standing up.

"Is it, Cooper? He showed up at your door one day when you weren't even completely dressed. I saw it with my own eyes."

"I was missing my _boots_, you son of a---"

"What's going on here?" Petty Officer Michael Reynolds asked. He'd walked up from the counter when he'd heard Smythe and I arguing.

Lieutenant Smythe ignored Reynolds, and instead looked Willis in the eyes. "I'll let you deal with him," Smythe said, and walked away.

Was I the only one who caught that smug smile on his face?

"El-Tee? What's going on?" Reynolds glanced at Willis. "Is he bothering you?"

"No, he's---"

Willis suddenly stood up and got in Petty Officer Reynold's face. "Who the fuck are you, and what are you doing hanging near my wife all the time?"

"Huh?" Reynolds asked, clearly perplexed.

"Answer me," Willis said through gritted teeth.

"Will, you don't need to---"

"I have no idea what you're---" Reynolds began, but stopped when Willis grabbed his shirt collar. "Hey, man---!"

"Bullshit. I want to know. _Now_."

"That's it," I said, sick of the amount of testosterone in the room. "Will, please let him go."

He looked at me like I was nuts. "Let him _go_?"

"That's what I said."

Willis stared first at me, then at Reynolds. And he immediately reached the wrong conclusion.

"Ohâ€|" Willis said, releasing his grip on the petty officer's shirt.

"Will, come on, I told you Smythe's just a pain in the---"

"No, I get it now." Willis started walking away, saying, "I really doâ€|"

Petty Officer Reynolds glanced at me, and I let out a frustrated sigh.

"Oh, crap!" I muttered, then called after Willis.

Once outside, I called out to him again. "Will, would you please wait for me!"

Finally he turned around. "I get it now, Coop. I totally get it."

"Get _what_?" I asked when I'd caught up to him.

"Why you're so reluctant to talk about Heath." Willis looked away for a moment and swallowed hard. "Is that why you won't tell me anything? Did something happen between you and that medic?"

"You're joking, right?" I questioned, in utter disbelief.

He swallowed again. "Natalie, look, if this—if _we're_ _not_ working out, just tell me."

"I can't believe you'd buy that---"

"I need to know!"

I smiled sadly and shook my head, then turned back to Willis. He wasn't the type to get angry, but he sure played the part well when he did.

"You really want to know what happened on Heath, Will?" I asked him.

"Yes," Willis answered, his voice tight from controlling his anger.

"Ok, here's a list of events for you. I spent five months in a smoldering forest and watched my platoon, my company and my fellow Marines get killed. I was _this_ close to joining them. It's a freaking miracle I'm alive, not paralyzed, and that medical technology is so advanced. Otherwise by now, I'd have severe burns covering me head to toe and I'd look like a piece of fried meat. Then, I was sent to a desert where I saw _more_ of my buddies die. And Smythe's little 'sore ribs' joke?" I pointed to my side, where the wound had been. "_That's_ where I had a piece of shrapnel go into my bone. The reason why I was in the medical tent so often? Bingo."

Willis stood there, dumbfounded. It was ok if he was speechless, however, because I had plenty of words for him.

"I lost my aide there, too, Will. He was eighteen years old, this kid, sweet as can be, and had his whole planet blown to smithereens. He bled to death right in front of me, and I still haven't gotten over it. So there's your damn Heath story, now leave me the fuck alone."

And with that, I stalked off.

Author's Note: Next chapter is here, for your reading pleasure. ;-)
Remember since you're reading to please review!

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>Chapter Eighteen: When In Doubt, Use Your Fist**

I was walking down the street, still fuming, when I heard footsteps behind me.

"I think I made myself clear, Will. I don't want to speak to you right now," I said loud enough for him to hear.

"It's not him. It's Reynolds, ma'am." came the reply.

I turned around, glaring at the medic. "What are you following me for?"

"N-nothing," he said upon seeing my expression. "I, uh, I just wanted to apologize for the scene back there."

I sighed and turned away. "I knew something like this would happen," I muttered.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I didn't mean to cause trouble."

I wasn't sure how to reply, and so we walked side by side in silence for a few steps.

"I don't think your husband likes me very much, El-Tee," the petty officer finally said. "Not that I blame him, I guess."

"He's normally easy-going," I said in Willis's defense. "But he gets very protective when it comes to me."

"You meanâ€¦jealous? Controlling?"

I shook my head, amused. "Not at all. He just wants to make sure I'm ok."

Reynolds turned red and looked away. "Right. Sorry, this is none of my business."

"Well, I suppose we should be getting back to base. You can tell Captain Kingston I'm completely pain-free all of a sudden," I said to the medic, hoping to steer the conversation in a more professional direction.

"Are you sure? Once you're in, that's it," Reynolds warned me.

I thought about what he said; no matter how mad we were at each other, I couldn't let Willis leave like this.

"I guess you're right." I stopped walking, and Petty Officer Reynolds waited. "I've, uh, I've got to go find him. Tell Kingston and the platoon I'll see them tomorrow for training."

"Yes, ma'am." Reynolds replied, and headed off toward

base.

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By early evening, I'd walked through enough streets to cover the entire planet---or at least it seemed that way to me. For all the effort, I had nothing to show for it, and I was starting to get thirsty. So, when I passed by a pub catering to the military personnel stationed at Europa Base, I decided to take a break. I hadn't had a drop of alcohol since before my deployment to Heath, and an ice-cold beer sounded incredibly appealing.

I walked up to the bar, slightly nervous about being recognized but ordering a drink anyway. With so many Marines, ODSs, and naval personnel stationed on Europa Base, what were the chances of my company members showing up?

The bartender placed a frosty mug of beer in front of me, and as I enjoyed the refreshing flavor for the first time in months, I looked around the place. Most of the bar was filled with Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, but a few Marines here and there made me feel a little less alone. Satisfied with the environment and the beer, I turned back to face the bar, where a screen was displaying updated news reports from other planets.

Particularly engrossed in a story on Marines winning back a base in Heath space and nursing my beer, I almost didn't notice the tap on my shoulder.

"What brings you here, Lieutenant Cooper?" I heard a voice ask behind me. I put my mug down, thought of a nice excuse for my absence at training, and turned to face the speaker.

Lieutenant Smythe's icy blue eyes and carnivorous grin mocked me.

"Smythe, you are easily the last person I'd like to see right now. Please be courteous and get the fuck out of my face, or I'll be forced to remodel yours," I said pleasantly.

"Excuse me? Remodel my face?" Smythe laughed. "I guess things didn't work out too well for you and Billy."

I glared at the other lieutenant. "His name isn't Billy, Smythe, and you know it."

"Did you tell him about your fuckfest with pretty boy Mike Reynolds?"

That was the breaking point for me; I was done putting up with Smythe's little shenanigans. I stood and punched him in the face, hard. The action felt so much better than it had the first time.

The lieutenant staggered, but the grin on his face did not disappear; if anything, Smythe looked even more amused.

"I knew I could get you to fight me," he sneered.

"You're going to wish you were a Covie prisoner when I'm done with you," I shot back.

I didn't know it then, but I'd come to regret those words.

At six-three and two hundred pounds of muscle, Jon Smythe was not someone to mess with. But once challenged, it was hard for me to back down. And so I had no choice but to give it my all and hope my hand-to-hand skills were up to the task.

His fist came at my face first, but my petite frame allowed me to duck in time. Smythe's hand ended up hitting the edge of the bar, and I heard a sickening crack as one of his knuckles broke. Highly aware of the fact that that crack could have been my face, I decided to take a more cautious approach.

As Lieutenant Smythe lifted his hand for a second try, I rammed my fist into his side. He let out an angry yelp and smacked his head against my skull.

I lost my footing and slumped between the barstools. My head was whirling and throbbing from the blow, and my vision was jumping around like crazy. Smythe was luckier, as he recovered enough balance and sight to grab me by my shirt and haul me back to my feet.

"I think my face is still normal, Cooper. And it looks like you're the one who's regretting this engagement," he said. His voice sounded muffled and far away.

"Bite me, Jonny boy," I managed to say.

Smythe's haughty expression suddenly morphed into fury. Still a little out of it, I was powerless to do anything when he released his grip on my shirt and grabbed my shoulder instead. Holding me up against the bar with one arm, he used his free hand to punch me in the stomach.

He let me drop to my knees, and as I struggled for air that wouldn't enter my lungs, he laughed.

"Don't sign up for the Big Leagues if you can't cut it, Cooper," he spat.

For the next frightening few seconds, I felt like a fish out of water. My mouth was open and actively seeking oxygen from the air around me, but it wasn't getting any. My vision had finally returned, but if this kept up I'd soon lose it again.

Finally, when I could actually feel myself turning blue, I managed to take in one ragged breath before Smythe tried to kick me in the face. I flattened myself on the ground, suddenly aware of the crowd around us, and avoided the lieutenant's boot by mere centimeters.

Just as I rolled onto my back to stand back up, however, the other lieutenant planted his boot firmly near my throat.

"Smythe, what the hell are you trying to do?" I croaked. Who would've thought my lungs would suffer more in this fight than my extremities?

"You're losing, Cooper." He looked me in the eyes for a moment, then said, "You're an ok fighter, butâ€¦well, it's time for the K.O."

Instead of receiving a knock out blow from Lieutenant Smythe, however, I watched as his neck was suddenly pulled back from behind.

"First thing you need to learn, Hotshot," Willis said into Smythe's ear, "is never hit a lady."

"Screw you," the lieutenant said, his voice hoarse from being in a chokehold.

Smythe then made unintelligible sounds as Willis tightened his grip on his neck.

"Maybe next time you'll think twice about fighting my wife? And perhaps learn to keep slanderous bullshit to yourself?"

"Kissâ€¦myâ€¦ass," Smythe said, trying to elbow Willis in the stomach to let go.

"Be good, or you'll be dead," my husband warned.

Though smaller and younger, Willis was overpowering Smythe with the instinctive need to protect me. When the other officer had gone long enough without air, he stopped struggling. Not wanting to seriously hurt the lieutenant, Willis finally loosened his grip.

"All right," Smythe wheezed. "All right."

"Say it," Willis growled.

"I'mâ€¦I'm sorry, Cooper. Christ, am I sorryâ€¦" Smythe coughed, and Willis let the lieutenant go with a shove.

As Smythe staggered out of the bar holding a hand to his neck, Willis came quickly to my side. Unfortunately, I was still on the floor, having problems of my own with oxygen intake.

"Natalie?" Willis asked, clearly worried. "Focus on me, Coop. Can you see me?"

"Of course I can, you twit. I'm not blind," I rasped, slightly annoyed.

Willis just grinned. "Yup, you're ok." He knelt beside me, put a hand under my arm, and helped me stand.

"Thanks," I said when I could breathe again. "But I didn't need your help."

Willis snorted. "Yeah, I could see that. C'mon, let's get outta here."

"I'm still mad at you, you know."

"Why don't we talk about this later, huh? I've got a cab waiting for

us outside."

I reluctantly followed Willis to the cab, but I didn't let him help me any further. My head was pounding, my lungs burned, my stomach felt bruised, but my pride was intact. I'd put up a decent fight in an unequal match, and I was walking out on my own two feet.

20. Chapter 19: Crisis Averted

Author's Note: The next chapter is going to be short, so here's a bonus ;-). As always, hope you enjoy and please review! Thanks.

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* * *

>Chapter Nineteen: Crisis Averted**

"Since you're doing a vow of silence at the moment, I guess I'll start."

We were sitting at a caf  outside the Galaxy Stars hotel, sharing coffee and pastries, and generally enjoying the late evening breeze.

But not so much each other's company.

Willis was trying hard to change that, though, and I was equally determined to get him to realize the huge mistake he'd made. He'd proven that when it came to my word against a stranger's, the stranger usually won. The fact that he didn't trust me? Yeah, that didn't sit too well with me.

"I'm sorry, Coop, I really am," Willis said when I remained silent. "It was horrible of me to think you weren't mentioning Heath because you'd cheated on me, when in reality it was simply too painful. And I'm sorry that I added to that pain."

I finally stopped focusing on a point in the sidewalk and turned my gaze on him. "You know, I thought that after seven years together and having a kid, maybe you'd know me well enough to not worry about other men. But I see I was sadly mistaken."

"You're right, Natalie. I don't really know what else to say."

"Try, 'I think I'll trust you, seeing as you love me a lot more than anyone else ever could.' See if that helps."

A faint grin appeared on his lips. "I messed up big time, huh?"

I looked into the contents of my coffee cup, mostly empty by now, and thought of his timely rescue at the pub. I guess I had to give him some credit, at least for that. If it weren't for him, I would probably be waking up on the floor of the bar during peak hours and my reputation would be shot to hell.

He'd also given me the aspirin that had now dulled the pain of a throbbing headache. I could've sworn Smythe had cracked my skull wide open with that hit 

"Still with me, Coop?" Willis asked suddenly.

"Yeah, just thinking," I said. He'd also paid for these tasty snacks we were now enjoyingâ€|

"Reach a verdict yet?"

"Hold on. Jury's deliberating."

"I've learned it's always best not to disturb you when you're referring to yourself as more than one person."

"Table's not that big, Will. I can reach your leg with my own, you know."

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Footsy?"

"I was actually thinking of kicking you for that multiple personality comment."

"Oh."

I sighed, then replied more seriously, "I've said what needs to be said, Will. I just don't appreciate the lack of confidence, especially when you know me better than that."

"I know. I was wrong and I made a mistake. I should have listened to you and not what that idiot was spewing from his mouth," Willis said, staring down at his coffee. Then he suddenly looked up at me. "But I do trust you, Natalie, and I don't want you to believe otherwise. It was just a bad combination of the situation and what you wouldn't tell me, and I jumped to the wrong conclusion. I'm sorry."

"That's a little better."

We sat in silence for a few moments, glancing around the street and people, mostly soldiers, walking by. Finally, Willis drained the last of his drink and rested his gaze on me.

"Natalie?"

I turned to look at him.

"No pressure, butâ€|if you want to talk about Heath, I'm listening." He reached out across the table with his hand.

I stared at his hand and thought about whether or not his answer had been satisfying. Then I remembered what Graham had told me about finding a way to deal with Beesner's death, and maybe this was it. If anyone could help, it was Willis.

I took his hand and began, "Well, it started in a forestâ€|"

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"Wow," Willis said when I finally finished my tale sometime later. He had been quiet the whole time, listening intently, and hadn't

interrupted me at all.

He also never let go of my hand, even when I gave it a strong squeeze to keep from bawling in public. That part came towards the end, when I told him about what had happened to Beesner.

Presently, my husband ran his free hand through his amber hair.

"I feel awful, Coop. I must have seemed like such a _dick_â€|" he muttered.

"Pretty much," I said with a slight grin. "But you didn't know the story yet. I guess it's ok to forgive you."

"Natalieâ€|" he started, his hazel eyes pained.

"Will, what's done is done. Besides, you made up for it pretty well afterward." Already I felt more at peace with the young private's death, simply by talking about it openly with Willis. As I'd learned long ago, my husband always had a knack for being a good listener and making me feel better.

Willis shrugged. "It's the least I could do, considering." Despite his words, he seemed a little more at ease.

I looked at him, and I could sense his discomfort return under my penetrating gaze.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Something else is bothering you," I said matter-of-factly.

He gave me a half-hearted grin. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, for one thing, you haven't let go of my hand yet," I pointed out. As I'd predicted, his hand immediately separated from my own. "C'mon, Will. Out with it."

He shifted in his seat, suddenly self-conscious, and ran a hand through his hair a second time. Finally, he faced me again. "There's something I have to tell you."

"So I gathered."

He swallowed. "And it's kind of big news."

"Hit me with it."

"I'm being transferred to Earth. Again."

I sat up in my seat. "What? Why? You just pulled defense duty a year ago."

"I know, but afterâ€|after we had our fight, I found out that the Covenant had just glassed a planet in a system close to Rondurass. And since our ships have not yet been released from prototype, no one wants the Covies finding out about 'em. So the whole project's moving to Earth."

"That'sâ€|quite a change."

"For the better though, I think," Willis said, speaking quickly. "I'll be closer to you and much closer to Gabe. I'll probably even be able to see him. It'll be good for him to have at least one of his parents nearby." Willis paused to drink from his second cup of coffee. "Besides, you know Earth is generally equated with light duty, like this place, since the Covies haven't found it."

"Yet," I reminded him.

Willis looked at me. "You're worried about me going to Earth when Gabe's been there this whole time?"

"I'm going to worry about both of you. I'm going to worry about my husband, my son, and my mother being on the same planet. Above all else right now, the Covies are searching like crazy for Earth's location."

"And the UNSC is working just as hard to make sure they don't find it," Willis countered.

"Well, with human-occupied space getting smaller and smaller every day, we'll see how long that lasts."

"I've never known you to be pessimistic, Coop."

"I'm being realistic. We can't hide Earth forever, but that doesn't mean I think we're done for when they find it. It'll just make us fight harder when we're in desperation mode."

"You do work well under pressure." He looked at his watch then, and I realized that it was nearly time for him to leave. I'd completely forgotten that in a few hours, he'd be gone, with no guarantee that I'd ever get to see him again. I tried my best to hide the aching emptiness I suddenly felt.

"'Bout that time, huh?" I asked, my voice revealing nothing.

"Came up quick, didn't it?" he said, giving me a half-smile.

"Leaving from Port Thirty-Nine?"

"Yup."

"Military or civvie?"

"UNSC property, Natalie. You know I don't trust pilots who haven't been in the thick of it."

"And here I thought you trusted no one to fly those things but yourself."

"We're good at avoiding this goodbye thing, aren't we?"

"The best. C'mon, I'll flag us down a cab."

Once on base, Willis came to my office to gather the belongings he'd left there. He changed back into his uniform, and then we finally made our way to Port Thirty-Nine. It was a modern military spaceport

with many conveniences all around. Shuttle rides up to the orbital platforms, where the ships were usually docked, came by every fifteen minutes—and right now that short time window was killing me.

"My ride leaves in three hours. I'd better be getting up there, Coop," Willis said. He grinned. "You know those ol' Navy guys don't like to be kept waiting for their jarheads to board."

"So this is it, huh? You're off to Earth then?" I asked, amazed at the control in my voice.

Willis shook his head. "Meeting up with my unit first, on Rondurass. Then in two weeks we'll be rocketing off to the central hub of human space. Once we get settled I'll let you know where I am, if they let me."

I nodded. "Say hi to Gabriel for me, if you see him. Tell him I'll be home soon, and even though I'm not with him, I love him very, very much. And I'm always thinking of him."

"Of course."

He dropped his military-issue duffel bag and wrapped his arms around me. Without saying anything, I hugged him back tightly.

For a while we were both silent, shutting out the sounds of thousands of other uniformed travelers going about their business in the port. Goodbyes were often harder than battles themselves.

"The war will be over eventually, Natalie," Willis whispered. "Like you said, one good push at the end could finish this mess. And then we won't have to spend any time apart at all. Me, you, and Gabe will be a real, close family. And we'll expand our family, too."

I nodded.

"I love you, Natalie. A lot more than anyone else ever could."

"I love you, too, Will. Even though you quoted me."

"Doesn't make it any less true."

We kissed several times, and then, with one last signature grin and a wave, he was gone again.

21. Chapter 20: Sobriety is Overrated

****Chapter Twenty: Sobriety is Overrated****

Almost two weeks had gone by since my husband's unexpected visit. The memory was still fresh in my mind, but enough time had gone by that I was usually too busy in my work to really think about it. The first few days after he'd left, however, had been hard; it had taken a pep talk from Lieutenant Graham to turn me back into my cheerful self. She was turning out to be quite the mentor for me.

These past several days had passed by much as they had before: with training and paperwork. It was amazing how much paper could accumulate while you were out on missions, especially considering

that most files were kept exclusively on datapads to avoid clutter. Guess that didn't work out too well, judging by the amount of letter-signing and writing I was doing.

A new development that had surprised me in recent days was the sudden departure of Lieutenant Jon Smythe. He hadn't so much as looked in my direction since the bar brawl, and then one day he was simply gone. When I asked Graham about it, she told me he'd been transferred for reasons unknown.

I couldn't believe my good fortune.

Just six days earlier, his replacement had come in. First Lieutenant Dean Lewis was twenty-eight years old from New London, Mars. Not only was he from my own planetary backyard, but he was also a veteran of a couple of campaigns I'd been involved in myself. Crazy, funny, and always grinning like a nut, red-haired Dean was a great addition to the company.

The other new company member who'd come in with Lewis was a young second lieutenant named Laura Hillburn. The lieutenant's family was originally from Harvest, where humans had first witnessed the wrath of the Covenant, but the family had relocated to Earth before she was born. The twenty-year-old Hillburn had been sent to Sigma Octanus IV to shadow me and "learn the ropes"; she had not yet been in combat. I wasn't sure how much more she could learn by training and doing office work, though. Those were the same things she had done to get commissioned in the first place.

Presently, I was finishing up plans for the next day's platoon training when there was a knock on the door.

"Enter," I said.

I heard my relatively new aide, Corporal Garian, walk in and stop in front of my desk. When I looked up, I saw him standing there at perfect attention, arms at his sides and eyes looking straight ahead.

"Ma'am?"

"What's the word, Corporal?"

"Lieutenants Lewis, Hillburn, Samson, and Frederick are here to see you, ma'am."

"Thank you, Corporal. You may send them in," I replied.

"Yes, ma'am." Corporal Garian made a crisp about-face and walked back towards the door, letting the other lieutenants in.

"All right," I said, leaning back in my chair, "what're all of you here for?" I grinned, knowing full well the answer to that question.

"We thought you were lookin' a little thirsty there, Coop," Second Lieutenant Zackary Samson of third platoon said.

"Eeeeeeeexactly, Cooper," Second Lieutenant Casey Frederick of second platoon added intelligently.

"So, what's it gonna be, Sensei?" Hillburn asked expectantly.

I gave them a quizzical look, pretending I had no idea what they were talking about. In reality, this had been the weekly routine for Samson, Frederick, some other lieutenants and I since my husband's departure. The recent addition of Lewis and Hillburn only made it better.

"We're going out for a pint---" Lewis began.

"---or a quart---" Frederick interjected.

"---and we would like to know if our best mate would come along?" Lewis finished.

"Well, I got a lot of work, you guysâ€¦" I said, trailing off.

"That is absolute rubbish, Natalie, and we know it," Lieutenant Lewis replied.

Finally, I grinned again. "Ah, hell. You know any excuse to indulge in my alcoholism is a good one. Let's get outta here already," I said.

Though I was to have a superb evening lasting into the wee hours, I was going to come to deeply regret it the next day.

22. Chapter 21: Bad Timing

Author's Note: And now the real fun begins! lol. Hope you enjoy, please please please review, and peace!

* * *

>Chapter Twenty-One: Bad Timing**

**0723 Hours, February 16, 2552. Europa Base, City of Cote D'Azur.
"The Unexpected Assault," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. Prologue to Battle of Sigma Octanus IV**

The day began like any other at Europa Base on Sigma Octanus IV. My alarm went off at 0600 hours, just as it did every morning. The only real difference was the migraine and burning eyes I'd woken up with; the other lieutenants and I had called it a night at two in the morning. And I wasn't even about to mention the obscene amount of beer and liquor I'd downed over the course of the night. Despite my jest the day before, I wasn't normally inclined to have so many drinks.

So, like all other mornings (except for the increased difficulty), I showered, did my hair in a fashion that satisfied military regulations, and generally attended to matters of personal hygiene. In an hour I was also dressed in a freshly pressed uniform, minus my boots. Today was inspection day (another indication that yesterday's night out hadn't been so cleverly planned), so I sat down on my bunk and started polishing my combat boots. As an officer, I was expected to set the example, even if I was terribly hung over.

Besides, I had a reputation of perfect marks on my inspections to uphold.

With ten minutes until the officers were to assemble on the parade ground, I was busy polishing my campaign medals, including my recent Purple Heart, when I felt the first earthquake.

At first, I honestly thought it was the hangover that was making me jittery or something. My mind didn't drift towards the concept of _Earthquake!_ until the second shock moved the bunk beneath me.

I stood, grabbing hold of my helmet and my pistol holster. I quickly took the photo of Gabe and the other of Willis and I and jammed both into the helmet padding; that's where I always kept my family pictures during deployments. And it looked like my stay on Europa Base was about to become just that.

When a third "earthquake" reverberated through the room, I was reaching for the doorknob when I heard someone pounding at my door.

"Cooper! _Cooper!_"

I opened the door to find Graham standing there, putting her helmet on and rifle already slung on her shoulder.

"Tell me this is natural, Graham," I said to her, my voice calm but my pulse pounding. Who would've thought my company's place of R&R would become the grounds of another Covenant invasion? "Please tell me it's a drill or something other than what I think it is."

Lieutenant Graham jerked me by the collar and shoved me forward so abruptly I almost yelped. "I've got no time to give you a verbal essay, Professor," the older woman said to me. "Just get your ass to the armory and grab everything you can."

My eyes went wide. This had to be a nightmare, this _couldn't_ be happeningâ€¦ "So they really _are_ here, aren't they?" I whispered.

"Yes! Go! Kingston's waiting on us to gather the platoons! Put your helmet on and I'll brief you as you go!"

I nodded, slapped my helmet on my head, and sprinted down the hallway. Graham's voice flooded into my head through the COM channel as I rounded the corner.

"First Covenant ships dropped in from Slipspace two hours ago. Navy's been trying to fight 'em off in orbit ever since, but it looks like some alien ships got through. And now they're bombarding the planet in preparation for a ground attack," the lieutenant explained.

I was suddenly very thankful that today was inspection day; if it hadn't been, I would have been wearing my utterly useless garrison uniform instead of my gray battledress.

I still couldn't believe we were under attack by the Covenant.

Finally making it to the armory a minute later, I ran into a mess of the various soldiers stationed around this sector of Europa Base, all hoping to get weapons as well. Luckily I'd had some experience shoving my way through crowds, so I managed to get myself into the actual room. Back in my quarters I'd already strapped my two combat knives and silenced pistol to my person; now my focus was on getting extra ammo clips, grenades, and maybe another gun if I could find it.

"Cooper, scratch what I said," Graham's voice invaded my helmet again. "The Covies aren't trying to get troops on the ground---they're here, now, about fifty klicks out and closing fast. Those explosions earlier were coming from their air support."

"Fuck," I muttered, responding both to Graham's news and the empty box of grenades in front of me. I moved on to the next rack.

"I know. Hurry, Kingston's already getting the company organized out here."

The next weapons locker was also empty, but hanging way in the back was one last battle rifle. I snatched it up before the ODS behind me had a chance to get the weapon, then I turned to find boxes of ammo. Most were completely devoid of equipment, but one had four extra clips, including one of shredder rounds. Perfect.

"On my way towards you, Graham. Put up your location on my HUD," I said, shoving my way back out the armory. I was intent on exiting the increasingly crowded room when I spotted one lone shotgun propped invitingly against a locked door. I thanked my lucky stars, picked that up as well, and even managed to get extra shells.

Once out of the armory, I shoved ammo clips and shells into my cargo pockets, keeping my two personal silenced pistol clips on my hip holster. I slung the battle rifle diagonally across my back, barrel facing the ground, and started off, holding my shotgun.

I followed the map Graham had uploaded to my heads up display, finally reuniting with my own company.

"Ok, Bravo Company, listen up!" Captain Kingston bellowed. "The Covenant will get here in less than an hour, and we've got a base as well as a planet to defend! We have been tasked to go out on patrol and do a little recon! Battalion wants to know how many of those fuckers we have to deal with, and they chose us to get that intel!" The captain suddenly gestured to me with his assault rifle. "Lieutenant Cooper!"

"Sir!" I yelled, more because of the adrenaline pumping through my veins than anything else.

"Since you have trained in stealth, first platoon will take point! Third platoon follows at a distance of two klicks, second platoon at four. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir!" Graham, Lewis, and I exclaimed in unison.

"Let's go kick the Covies back into Slipspace, Marines! Semper fi!" Kingston shouted.

"Oorah!" we all screamed.

23. Chapter 22: Out on Patrol

Author's Note: Thank you so much to all reviewers! I love getting feedback and I greatly appreciate your comments. So don't hesitate to hit that review button when you're done reading! ;-) Hope you keep enjoying the story and please continue to review! Peace!****

* * *

>Chapter Twenty-Two: Out on Patrol

The streets of Cote D'Azur looked pleasant in the orange morning sunlight. Walking through them with weapons in hand and explosions throwing you off your feet, however, was an entirely different matter.

Because my platoon was ordered to take point, I was leading not only them through the eerie-quiet city streets, but the entire company. I would be the first to make contact with the Covenant and probably be the first to die.

Some luck.

I looked down at my shotgun again as I walked forward, first squad in tow. The safety was off, as I suspected; the gun was also fully loaded. One movement that caught my eye the wrong way would find a twelve-gauge shotgun shell in its chest.

Only first squad and I were out on the streets, marching forward quickly but cautiously. Hidden on our left flank was third squad, while second acted as rearguard. Several clicks back were third and second platoons, as ordered.

We had only gone six kilometers towards the city when Lieutenant Hillburn hailed me.

"Find something, Hillburn?" I radioed.

"Not really, ma'am. I was just thinking about those Banshee air patrols."

"What about them?" I asked, involuntarily looking up at the sky.

"Wellâ€¦where are they?"

I suddenly realized she was right. I doubted we'd gotten pilots up that fast from Europa Base, or that they'd had enough air power to take on Banshees covered by battleships.

"I don't know, Lieutenant. But let's keep our eyes and ears peeled. And watch those motion trackers, because the Covenant might be sending out probing patrols of their own. Relay these orders to the platoon," I said.

"Yes, ma'am."

The young second lieutenant was with third squad at the moment; we had to be separated because if something happened to me, she'd have to take over the platoon. But what she'd said was true: we were forty-four kilometers from the Covenant force, maybe less since they were moving towards us, and still no alien aircraft. Something fishy was going on.

As I walked along the road, I wondered where all the civilians had gone. I found it hard to imagine that they'd been evacuated if this had been a sneak attack. So why were these places devoid of people? While this was the less populated area of the huge city, there should have been at least some amount of activity. But so far, there was only the sound of our boots hitting the pavement.

The calm before the storm, I thought to myself. Something's going to happen soon here. I just wish I knew what and from which direction. _

Presently my radio crackled, and Kingston's voice surrounded my helmeted head.

"Lieutenant Cooper, report."

"Nothing yet, sir. It's awfully quiet."

"That's exactly what bothers me, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. I've got that spine-tingling feeling that---"

I happened to glance up at the sky and see a swirl of purple swoosh through the clouds above. And last time I checked, clouds weren't purple on Sigma Octanus IV.

"Cooper?"

"Banshees," I whispered.

"Lieutenant Cooper?"

My heart started pounding.

"Sir! Banshees inbound! Coming in from the northwest, ten o'clock!"

"Take care of 'em, Lieutenant!" The captain ordered.

"Yes, sir!" I cut the connection and turned around to face my Marines. "First squad! Get behind those houses and hang on tight! Things are going to get interesting!"

"Ma'am? What's going on?" Corporal Dandh asked me.

"Banshees circling overhead, Corporal. And it looks like they're getting ready to make a pass."

As I ushered first squad to cover behind the area of spread-out houses, I opened a platoon-wide COM channel.

"First platoon, listen up! We've got Banshees on their way in! I want

second squad up on those rooftops behind us sniping, now! Lieutenant Hillburn, get third squad to cover and keep your heads down! All heavy weapons rendezvous with first squad immediately!"

I watched as yellow dots on my motion tracker approached my position; I was crouched in someone's front yard, waiting, watching.

"Ma'am, we've got five Banshees, repeat, five Banshees coming in hot!" Corporal Dandh reported.

"Heavy weapons, you'd better be triple-timing it or we'll be a pile of rubble in about two minutes!" I said over the COM channel.

"Ma'am!" a voice beside me said. I turned and saw his friend-or-foe tag read LCPL GARDNER.

"Set up near that concrete planter over there, Lance Corporal," I instructed. "Try to get a Banshee on the way in and one on the way out. Anyone else have a rocket launcher?"

"Just me, Private First Class Jimenez, and Sergeant Russell, Lieutenant."

"Tell Russell to set up near the park bench down the street so he can get whoever you miss. Jimenez is to stay on the porch of the next house over. If things get too hot, stay low. Now go!"

Gardner sprinted to the planter on the other side of the street, where beautiful daisies, carnations, and roses were blooming. Too bad they were about to get fried by Covenant air support.

True to their name, I heard the Banshees on their approach before I saw them scream low into the road. Lasers of hot blue plasma left scorch marks on cars, homes, lawns, and other objects in the suburban environment. While crouching low in my same position, and ordering my troops to do the same, I watched the heavy weapons team at work.

Lance Corporal Stephen Gardner's rocket was propelled out of the tube with a wooshing sound; it flew at the alien aircraft at velocities only my helmet could track. Within seconds, Banshee Number One was trailing black smoke.

Private First Class Hector Jimenez, just a house up from first squad and I, let another round loose when Banshee Number Two followed seconds later. The private's rocket went just slightly to the left as the Banshee, not wanting to end up like the first, spiraled out of the way.

Plasma rained down on the houses and buildings, and chunks of plaster, concrete, and wood crumbled from the structures. When a particularly large chunk fell at my feet, I opened a platoon-wide COM channel.

"First platoon, watch your heads! I don't want any reports of Marines down because of debris!"

Acknowledgment lights winked on my HUD.

"Lieutenant!" It was Sergeant Corey Russell.

"Report!"

"Banshees One and Two down! Looks like Banshees Four and Five are thinking hard about coming at us, but Three is headed this way!"

"Ma'am!" Jimenez radioed. "Banshee Three's circling and coming from behind! They're headed straight for Sarge!"

"Russell, track 'im on your six!" I yelled into the COM.

"Found him, ma'am. Getting a lock!"

"Fire!"

There was a fireball in the sky above, as both Jimenez and Russell launched rockets at Banshee Three in unison. The craft exploded in midair before ever firing on the ground.

"Banshees Four and Five banking. They're getting outta here, El-Tee!" Gardner exclaimed.

"Keep tracking them for another minute to make sure. Squads, report!" I said.

"First squad present and accounted for, ma'am!" Corporal Dandh replied.

"Second squad present and accounted for, Lieutenant!" Gunnery Sergeant Jack Hills, the platoon sergeant, said.

"Third squad present and accounted for, ma'am!" Second Lieutenant Hillburn answered.

"Petty Officer Reynolds!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"What's our status?"

"No wounded, ma'am."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Glad to hear it."

I cautiously got out of my cover then, and stepped out into the street. The sun was really beating down now, so I had to squint to look up at the sky; just as my platoon had informed me, the Banshees were gone.

"Heavy weapons, return to your respective squads. Stay sharp and ready, though. That's not the last of 'em, and they'll be back soon. Everyone else, form up and get moving."

As I started marching back up the street with my platoon following behind, I saw the destruction left behind by the Banshees. Several cars lining the side of the road and those in driveways burned. A couple of them exploded, and I had to radio the rest of the platoon to let them know it wasn't an attack. Homes were missing parts of

rooftops or stairs or had gaping holes in the walls; shattered glass lay everywhere.

When I finally walked by the planter Gardner had hidden behind, I noted that on top of the scorched flowers lay a single child's toy.

A smoking hole ran right through the teddy bear's middle.

24. Chapter 23: They Say War is Hell

Chapter Twenty-Three: They Say War is Hell

First platoon and I had walked another five kilometers through the streets in the next forty-five minutes; Banshee patrols, much like the one before, had kept the going slow. Somewhere up ahead I knew a Covenant force was looming, as the air patrols were gradually getting larger in numbers. Another thirty-odd clicks and we'd probably be on top of the Covenant invasion force.

The prospect didn't excite me too much. Bravo Company was supposed to find out how many Covenant troops were coming towards Europa Base, but I had the feeling we were walking into a trap. One company against an army of enemy soldiers? We were screwed in every sense of the word.

"Captain Kingston?" I radioed to my superior officer.

"What is it, Lieutenant Cooper? More Banshees?"

"No, sir. Not yet, anyway. Butâ€¦do you suppose Europa Base will send us any reinforcement, sir?"

"You know the drill, Lieutenant. We find the Covie force, we figure out how many there are, we get out, and we relay the info."

"All due respect, sir, but I don't think it's going to be that easy."

"I'll worry about that when the time comes, Cooper. You just keep moving ahead and take care of those patrols. You're doing an excellent job, by the way."

"Thank you, sir."

Somehow, the conversation left me disappointed.

"Lieutenant?" Hillburn's voice suddenly flooded my head.

"Go ahead," I replied.

"Looks like there might be civvies a few blocks up, ma'am. I thought they'd been evacuated, since there weren't any till now."

"There's no way. No one knew about the attack until it happened," I reminded her. I tinted my helmet's visor further to keep from squinting against the sun again, and pulled my field binoculars out of one of my cargo pockets. I always knew it had been a good idea to keep them near my uniform all the time. After ordering the platoon to

halt in a covered area, I looked through the binoculars.

Sure enough, two city blocks from our position, civvies were congregated near a fountain. Some were sitting, some were drinking water, and some walked about aimlessly. All were blackened by what I assumed was a large explosion; nearly all the buildings around them were at least halfway destroyed.

"Jesus," I breathed. I opened a channel to Petty Officer Reynolds, and told him to look at the scene ahead.

"Ma'am?" he asked, running up beside me.

"Take a look, Reynolds," I said, handing him my binoculars. A moment later, I heard him gasp.

"It's terrible," he said quietly.

One thing I'd noticed about Reynolds was that ever since Willis had given him the verbal---and almost physical---smackdown, the medic had quickly gotten over his attraction to me. This development made our off-duty friendship and on-duty professional relationship much easier on both of us; it was great to have him as a friend without the unspoken tension.

"Did you manage to grab any extra medical supplies before you were called out?" I asked him, returning to the present.

"I got the platoon gear, which is always prepped. I'm having Corporal Simmons and Private Foster carry some of it. Other than that, I have some extra sterile bandages, biofoam canisters, and morphine, but not enough for that many people plus us."

Here I was faced with a moral dilemma: should I allow Petty Officer Reynolds to give the injured civilians medical attention and risk not having equipment for ourselves, or should we walk right on by to ensure our later treatment?

There was no time to mull this over; I made the choice I thought was right and had Reynolds stay close to me as we continued our forward march.

For the last two clicks or so, the area had been getting more and more densely populated; we were getting closer to the heart of the city. And suddenly the absence of people in the suburbs made sense to me: since the suburbs were closer to Europa Base, the civilians had been quickly moved farther out. In this case, that meant closer to the hub of Cote D'Azur---and unfortunately, no one could have predicted that that would lie directly in the path of the invasion force.

"They've probably been getting pounded by Covenant air support," I said to Reynolds.

"Yes, ma'am. And did you notice their numbers? There's only about four or five dozen civilians around that fountain and hundreds of ruined homes."

I turned cold inside as the implications of what the medic was saying hit home. We were about to walk into a horrible scene of carnage and

death, and my stomach was already getting queasy.

"I really wish I wasn't so hungover," I muttered as we got closer to the fountain.

"Ma'am?"

"My head's been pounding for the past hour and a half now. I can hardly even think straight."

Despite the nasty situation we found ourselves in, the medic managed a half-smile. "You never cease to amaze me, El-Tee."

"What, you thought I was in the point oh-one percent of the military population that didn't drink?" I said with a smirk of my own.

"No, ma'am. I just find it interesting that you'd admit to being hungover to a subordinate. While we're being invaded."

"Yeah, well..."

The petty officer was about to reply to my unfinished statement when I stopped dead in my tracks.

We'd reached the block just before the fountain, and as I looked around at the destruction, I felt a part of me collapse inside.

"Oh, my God."

"I wish I could say I'd never seen anything like this, El-Tee."

The civilians near the fountain all looked dazed; most were bleeding from head, arm, leg, shoulder, or gut wounds. Scorch marks peppered the old water fountain, and water sprayed out at odd angles from the damage it had sustained. Only a few yards away from the shocked but living civilians, the fresh bodies of the less fortunate lay in pools of blood.

"Start triage, Reynolds," I ordered, my voice sounding automated.

"Yes, ma'am," the medic said, and he began to move through the crowd of civvies with mechanical efficiency. It was times like these when one went into an almost robotic state to keep the human side from insanity.

Like the medic, I, too, wished I'd never witnessed such a scene before. But with nearly five years of combat operations on various planets, I had to say this situation was not different from a handful of others I'd encountered.

Not that it ever got any easier to take.

Still on autopilot, I opened a COM channel to third platoon, who would be arriving on-scene in about twenty minutes, if all went well.

"Lewis?"

"What's going on, Cooper?"

"Weâ€¦" I paused to turn my back on the desolate sights before me. "Tell your medic to get ready to treat some civvies. We just found some evacuees."

"Ok. See you in a few. Lewis out."

As Petty Officer Reynolds completed his initial assessment of the fountain area, I walked around while waiting for the rest of first platoon to show up. I was hoping to find a civilian that was not too psychologically damaged to explain what had happened.

Stepping over dead bodies and debris, I found a man leaning against the side of a half-blown building, who seemed to be surveying the area with passing interest. He was dirty from the dust swirling around the place, and his clothes were torn and covered in scorch marks. He coughed as I approached him.

"Sir?" I said, using the external speakers on my helmet. I waited for him to acknowledge my presence with a glance before continuing. "I'm Lieutenant Natalie Cooper, UNSC Marines. Can you tell me what happened here?"

He stared at me for a moment, eyes somewhat distant. Then he refocused and shook his head. "I don't really know. I was just waking up to go to work and I got a warning message on my datapad. Said Covies were invading. My wifeâ€¦" The man placed a hand over his face for just an instant, then said, "Sheâ€¦said to come out here, where all the other evacuees were going. Then, not a half-hour ago, these purple alien things came screeching in, fired on everyoneâ€¦"

"Do you know how many there were, sir?"

"God, I don't know. They just blew everything apartâ€¦there were people running, screaming, buildings fallingâ€¦" His hand went to his face again, and his voice broke. "I have no idea where my wife and kids are!"

My throat caught for a moment as I tried to reply. This poor man, probably in his mid-forties, had just watched his family quite possibly get burned by Covenant plasma.

"Thank you for the information, sir. Our medic is coming by to treat injuries, so don't worry. Mind if I get your name? In case we see anyone from your family?"

"Greg Howard. Please, if you see Karen or my two little girlsâ€¦"

I nodded. "We'll let you know right away."

Trying to get back to the robotic state I'd been in just a few seconds ago, I continued my slow march around the fountain. The proportion of civilians lying dead on the street to those gaunt shells called "survivors" was staggering. Somewhere near the fountain, I walked up to a second civilian.

This civvie looked to be only a few years younger than Greg Howard, and he was in worse shape, too. Dried blood caked his face, and he was cradling his left arm; half of his short beard looked like it had been burned off.

"Sir?" I asked when I was close enough, using the speakers again.

He appeared to ignore me at first, still looking off in the opposite direction. When he did turn to me, he seemed startled, as if he had no idea I'd approached.

"Lieutenant Cooper, UNSC Marines. Know what happened here, sir?"

He just looked at my tinted faceplate, but said nothing for a good minute. Then, realizing that I had finished speaking, he yelled, "What?!"

I was about to repeat myself when he turned his head slightly to expose the left side. That's when I saw the dried blood on his face had streaked down from his ear; the man's eardrums had ruptured in an explosion. There was a good-sized laceration on the side of his forehead, as well.

I nodded, signifying I understood the message, and placed a gloved hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll get you fixed up, sir."

Though he didn't hear me, he, too, understood that I was trying to reassure him. He gave me a faint smile.

"Thank you!" he cried.

Resuming my recon of the fountain area, I finally slung my shotgun on my shoulder and lifted the faceplate of my helmet. For the first time since being on base, I breathed oxygen outside my own sealed helmet; the air smelled of dust, blood, and death. After only a few breaths, my lungs began to protest, and I had to pull down the tinted faceplate once more.

God, how awful it must be for these people, I thought. _They don't have any alternative to the air they're breathing._

Once I reached the side of the street we had marched up from, I knew my circle was complete. Meanwhile, Reynolds was still making the rounds, and I was about to radio him for information when I saw third squad walk up.

Second Lieutenant Hillburn made her way towards me, and I assumed she had questions about the situation. However, when she was standing just a few feet from me, I saw her take off her helmet. I opened a COM channel to correct her serious error, but stopped when she suddenly bent over before the dead bodies and puked.

Now my stomach was _really_ getting uneasy.

I walked the few steps separating us and stood above her, arms folded across my chest.

Hillburn rinsed her mouth with water from her canteen, then spat it out. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant," she said, still bent over and placing her hands on her knees.

"Are you kidding? I tossed my cookies _twice_ my first time," I assured her.

The young lieutenant looked up at me. "Really?"

"Yeah. First the sight, then the smell."

"Oh." The conversation halted momentarily as Hillburn vomited a second time.

"See?" I stepped back a few paces, and shook the chunks off one of my boots. "You'd better put your helmet back on, or you'll be throwing up some more."

The second lieutenant repeated the rinsing technique, then said, "Yes, ma'am." She put her helmet back on and hefted her assault rifle.

"Lieutenant?" Petty Officer Reynolds's voice came through the COM channel.

"Go ahead, Doc."

"Fourteen civvies are too far gone for treatment, ma'am. Twenty-eight others need medical attention, seventeen immediate. I only have enough supplies for about twelve if we're going to keep any for ourselves, El-Tee."

My head pounded inside my skull. "How many of our men can we treat if you give resources to only twelve civilians, Doc?"

"I'd say about seventy-five percent, ma'am."

"Twenty-two out of thirty," I remarked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Let's make the figure about fifty-fifty. That way you can treat those seventeen immediates, and the rest can wait for third platoon's medic."

"Got it, El-Tee."

"Ma'am?"

"What is it, Hillburn?"

"Orders?"

"Hang tight while Doc fixes up some civvies. Have first and third squads set up a perimeter, and have second squad up on some rooftops to provide us with sniper coverage. You stay down here with first and third, and I'll see what I can do about moving things along with the wounded. Tell everyone to stay alert. I have a feeling the Covies aren't done with this sector yet."

"Yes, ma'am."

Second Lieutenant Hillburn walked off then, in the direction of first and third squads. Delegating some of my duties to her would allow her to get some field leadership experience, and it would free me up for other tasks.

Still standing by the fountain, I radioed Captain Kingston with a report on first platoon's situation. I told him about this first group of civilian evacuees we'd found, and that the platoon medic was tending to the worst cases. Kingston approved, yet was somewhat concerned about what to do with the civilians once they'd been treated.

"Sir?" I asked, unsure what my commanding officer was getting at. "Can't we get some Warthogs up here from Europa Base?"

"That would require me to have contact with them, Lieutenant Cooper," the captain said, his voice somehowâ€|different.

It took me a moment to digest this information. "Does that mean the Covies have taken over base, Captain?"

"I'm not sure what that means, Cooper. All I know is that it isn't good."

"Orders, sir?"

"Since we don't know what the problem is yet, we keep on target. We'll continue heading towards the Covenant force until we can make contact, we'll get their numbers, and we'll head back to base. That way we can find out what's happening."

"And the civvies, sir?"

"Have Doc Reynolds keep going with the orders you gave him, then get all the civilians to a safe place. Tell them to stay there and wait for third platoon."

"Sir, all due respect, but if the civvies stay here, there is a high probability that they will only be attacked by the Covenant a second time."

"I'm aware of that, Lieutenant, but we don't have any choice until we can get into contact with base. We can't tote around thirty-plus civvies---some wounded---and have that figure grow as we get deeper into the city. Right now, the best thing we can do is hole them up in a safe spot. That way, when third and second platoons roll in, we can check up on them. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Kingston out."

When the connection cut, I was left feeling bitter. Not really at Kingston, because I knew that he was right and was trying to control an unmanageable situation as best he could. What bugged me most was that, as usual, things seemed to be going very wrong very fast. Europa Base was most likely under fire, and we had people in the city that needed to get out, fast. Some, I knew, wouldn't last more than a few hours without getting to a medical facilityâ€|and the longer they stayed in the path of the Covenant invasion, the higher their chances of not making it out alive.

I sighed and started a second walk around the fountain area, looking around for an appropriate "safe area" for the civvies to stay in

while they waited for the rest of Bravo Company. But if the Covenant were clearly coming this way with a large portion of their army, was any place really going to provide cover?

The answer, in my experience, was an overwhelming "no".

Lost in my thoughts, I hadn't noticed that I'd been staring absently down at a young girl, probably ten to twelve years old. She was covered head to toe in black scorch marks, and had two clean lines rolling down her cheeks---streak marks from tears. That's when I saw that she was holding bloody hands to her abdomen.

"H-hey," she said in a shaky voice. "C-can you help me?" Propped up on an elbow and leaning against a slab of concrete, the girl coughed a few times. She spat blood.

I felt my throat get dry as I crouched to her level and asked, through external speakers, "What's your name, kid?"

"Madison," she replied. "H-have you seen my dad anywhere?" Tears started to well up in her eyes. "I think my whole familyâ€|"

I swallowed hard on the lump in my throat and said, "Is your father a Greg Howard, by any chance?"

Though weak, Madison's eyes brightened. "Yeah!"

I nodded, stood, and opened a COM channel to Corporal Garian in my helmet.

"Ma'am?"

"Corporal, I need you to find a middle-aged man, uninjured, by the name of Greg Howard. Tell him we've found one of his daughters and take him to this location." I uploaded a map with a blinking green dot on Madison's location and sent it to Garian.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm on it."

I cut the connection, then crouched back down to the girl. "So what happened to you, Madison?"

Her face contorted for a moment, and I realized how much pain she must be in. When she recovered, she said in a tight voice, "Iâ€|don't really know. I think I passed out after the big boom I heardâ€|and then I had this hole in my tummyâ€|" She let out a whimper. "It hurts!"

I opened my helmet visor so the kid wouldn't be as frightened, and I placed a gloved hand on her shoulder. "I know, kid, I know. But don't worry, we've got your dad coming here right now, Madison. And we have a pretty good medic who'll get you fixed up soon."

"Have you found Risa and Mom, too?" the girl asked, her eyes only half open.

"Not yet, kid, but we're looking for them, all right?"

"Ok. What's your name, lady?"

The stench in the street was overwhelming, but that wasn't what was causing tears to glisten in my eyes. I brought my faceplate down once more. "Natalie," I replied. My last name and rank would probably mean very little to the child.

The girl smiled faintly. "Thanks for finding Daddy, Natalie."

"No problem."

I looked up, and saw Corporal Garian and Greg Howard coming up in the distance. I glanced back at Madison, and said, "Hang in there, kid. Your dad's on his way."

Madison nodded only slightly, and I knew that if Reynolds couldn't get to her soon, she would bleed out from the blast hole in her abdomen.

Fuck, I really hate this sometimes, I thought to myself, trying hard to turn my emotions off again.

Continuing my search for a good building, I radioed the medic as I walked.

"Reynolds?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"What's our status with the wounded civvies?"

"Seven treated so far, Lieutenant."

"There's a little girl near here that's in pretty bad shape."

"I know, El-Tee. A lot of these civvies aren't doing too well. I'm going as fast as I can, ma'am."

I cut the connection and happened to turn my head towards a small one-story building off to my left. It looked to be about right for what I needed, so I started off in its direction. Crossing the street, however, I was stopped abruptly by the scene that met me on the opposite side. My robotic state completely lost now, I dropped silently to my knees, holding onto my shotgun with one weak hand.

I couldn't take my eyes off it. Or, rather, him.

Slumped against a bus stop bench was a little boy of about four or five years. His beautiful brown hair was caked in dry, dark red blood; his deep blue eyes were frozen by death in a permanent look of panic and fear. The hole piercing his small chest was both black and red, old and fresh blood mixing on his blue shirt.

I just stared. I really couldn't do anything---my limbs had stopped working. I'd seen things like this before, but I guess at some point the mechanical part of you cracks and the human part comes creeping back out at the wrong time.

I was so transfixed in the reality of the horror that I couldn't even cry.

This was when I knew for sure: like it or not, the Battle of Sigma

Octanus IV had begun.

25. Chapter 24: Stunned Silence

Author's Note: I finally finished writing the story yesterday, so I'll continue with the quick updates. Hope you like it, and please continue to review! Reviews are awesome ;-) Peace!

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* * *

>Chapter Twenty-Four: Stunned Silence**

2302 Hours, February 16, 2552. UNSC Roosevelt Air Base, Skagen, Denmark. "The Home Front," Planet Earth. Day One of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV

Deep in the Inner Colonies of human-occupied space, the central hub of the entire United Nations Space Command could be seen as a magnificent blue and white sphere. On its surface, billions of humans, plants, and animals inhabited various parts of the globe, though now there were more humans and buildings than anything else. Still, First Lieutenant Brandon Heat loved being on planet Earth.

Ever since his squadron had arrived here in Denmark three days ago, Heat couldn't get over this place. Having been born on Tribute, far in the Outer Colony worlds, coming to Earth had always been a dream of his. And now, at twenty-five, his dream had finally come true.

Though not necessarily the way he'd imagined.

When he'd been a boy of about seven, Brandon became interested in the human homeworld. He'd gone through this phase after a particularly exciting segment in school was dedicated to Earth; ever since then, he'd started reading bookchips, viewing images, and watching vids. Back then, he'd thought his first trip to Earth would come at a time when the Covenant War was long over, and he'd figured on spending several years there researching for a book he'd one day write. He wasn't sure at the time what form the book would take, be it a novel, an encyclopedia, or a complete history of the planet, but he knew it would be something worthy of his passion.

Unfortunately, the Covenant War continued to rage throughout Brandon's childhood and teenage years. Now in early adulthood, Brandon still felt as if the war was dragging by, occupying all the time he could be spending doing what he'd always wanted to do. He was proud and glad that he was serving in the UNSC Marines and helping to bring the war to an end, but he certainly would have much rather the war end sooner than later.

Don't complain so much, Brandon told himself. _You're alive, and you're finally on Earth. Be thankful you have that much. _

The first lieutenant's thoughts and musings continued circulating in his mind until something caught his attention.

"---policy. In other news, UNSC forces have won a key battle in the Heath system today, declaring that an operation to take over a large Covenant base in the desert succeeded. Casualties were high on the human side, but paled in comparison to the amount of aliens that were destroyed in the decisive human victory."

Brandon suddenly sat up straight in the couch he'd been slouching in. He looked across the recreation room at his squadron's pilots and then glared in the direction of the holoscreen.

"Hey! What'd you guys turn that thing on for?" the lieutenant bellowed.

A few of his aircraft techs flinched at the tone of his voice, but his fellow pilots were quick to respond.

"We want to hear what's going on, Scholar," Pete Hinders replied.

"Can't all be bookworms, Heat! I'm curious to see if we're actually winnin' this thing or if we're just training to get added to the KIA list," Kit Thompson answered.

Brandon grumbled and resumed slouching in his seat. He knew his buddies were just teasing him in a friendly way, but he was upset that he had come into a quiet room to think only to find it being blasted by a loud anchorman.

"Just keep it down, would ya!" Brandon called.

"Sure thing, Scholar!" Hinders said, laughing.

Lieutenant Heat silently grinned at his nickname and picked up his datapad. He wanted to finish documenting his first few days on Earth.

"---on High Com said today that the war effort is quote 'heading in the right direction' and that humanity may soon be quote 'out of the woods' if this keeps up."

Unable to concentrate, Brandon sighed and looked back at the holoscreen. Most of the men in the rec room had now gathered around it, wanting to see if they'd hear any news about campaigns their loved ones might be in. Brandon had already found out about the death of two of his previous girlfriends that way, which was why he hated the holoscreen so much.

Still, he turned around on the couch so that he could face it. Though he wouldn't admit it, he was just as curious about what the anchorman had to say as anyone else.

Continuing the discussion about various campaigns, the anchorman was happily announcing several victories when he put a finger to his ear. In a matter of seconds, his expression and tone changed.

Now somber, the anchorman sighed. "I'm sorry to report that although we have had many triumphs today, I have just received word of devastating news."

All sounds in the rec room vanished. Men and women who weren't even

paying attention before suddenly turned to face the holoscreen. Brandon leaned over the back of the couch, straining to hear the silence on the screen.

"Just two hours ago at nine p.m. Earth time, and early this morning Sigma Octanus Four time, the Covenant invaded the planet with their fleets. Unfortunately, Sigma Octanus Four was subsequently glassed from orbit before human forces could repel the Covenant attack. Millions of people, including many members of the UNSC armed forces, have been killed in this awful turn of events."

After the announcement, someone put the holoscreen on mute.

For a few minutes it seemed like no one in the room even dared to breathe. Just like that, another human planet had been utterly obliterated by the Covenant, with no warning at all. Glassed from orbit, the anchorman had said; the planet had been so bombarded by Covenant plasma from their ships that the whole thing was nothing but infertile wasteland now. Cities had been leveled, people killed, vegetation boiled, and soil ravaged. The pilots knew, understood, and had seen this for themselves in the past.

But that wasn't why the room was so quiet.

All eyes suddenly focused on Brandon, and he became horribly aware of the only pilot in the squadron who was missing from the room. His own wingmate, combat partner, and best friend, as it so happened.

Lieutenant Heat ran a hand through his cropped brown hair, eyes wide. "Oh, my God," he whispered, staring at the ground. "I have to tell Willis." Knowing all eyes were on him, Brandon finally looked up at the others and spoke louder. "I have to tell Willis his wife is dead."

26. Chapter 25: News That's Hard to Break

****Chapter Twenty-Five: News That's Hard to Break****

First Lieutenant William "Willis" Hawk stared bleary-eyed at the alarm, which was buzzing next to his bunk. Sticking his head out from under the covers, he muttered some incoherent curses as he stretched his arm to silence the awful noise. Though he'd gone to bed early, exhausted from a long day's training session, the extra sleep hadn't seemed to help much. His eyes hurt just as much as always when he rubbed them.

He slowly rolled out of bed, pausing occasionally to stretch or yawn, and headed for the showers. Lieutenant Hawk noticed that the others seemed to almost avoid him, though he couldn't figure out why. After all, it had already been a couple of days since he'd come back to base so drunk he'd puked on Hinders, who'd been sleeping soundly in his bunk. Willis decided the feeling must be his imagination and he shrugged it off.

After Willis had returned to his quarters, shaved and dressed, he realized that the other pilots in the squadron continued to avert their eyes. Finally fed up, Willis stopped Lieutenant Jessica Meyers, who happened to be walking down the hall at the time.

"Hey, Jessie," Willis said casually, giving her a friendly smile.

"Hi, Willis," Lieutenant Meyers replied, trying desperately to avoid eye contact.

"Listen, this is going to sound weird butâ€¦I kinda have the feeling everyone's purposely steering clear of me. Now tell me the truth, Meyers. Did I do something else while I was drunk that night or---"

Willis stopped mid-sentence as he realized Jessica suddenly had tears in her eyes. She put a hand to her mouth and shook her head.

"Jessie? What's wrong?" Hawk asked, worried about his friend and fellow squadron pilot.

"Ask Brandon, Hawk. Iâ€¦I can't do this to you!" And with that, Meyers rushed down the hall.

Utterly perplexed, Willis decided he'd obey Jessica's request and go look for his wingmate. He wanted to get answers about everyone's odd behavior as soon as possible.

First things first, however; he realized he'd forgotten some important stuff in his quarters, stuff he never went anywhere without. Jogging back down the hall, he opened the door to his quarters to find Lieutenant Heat sitting on his bunk, holding the two items Willis had come back for.

"Hey, Brandon. What're you doing here, man?" Hawk asked, grinning.

It was one of the things everyone loved about Willis Hawk: he was always smiling, always optimistic, always cheerful.

Brandon Heat knew he was about to change not only his best friend's attitude and outlook on life, but his very _self_.

One of the other things the whole squadron knew and admired about Hawk was his fierce love for his family, most notably his wife and his son. Lieutenant Heat was about to shatter his poor buddy's entire world.

"Brandon? What the hell is going on today? No one will even look in my direction, and now you're not talking to me, either?" Willis sighed in frustration. "Will you at least tell me what I've done? Please?"

Brandon looked down at the floor, shaking his head because his lips refused to form the words that would devastate his friend.

"Oh, come on!" Willis cried. He pulled up a chair and sat directly across from Lieutenant Heat. "Brandon, we've only got a half hour before training starts, and I haven't had breakfast. And would you please tell me why the hell you're staring at my two pictures? You know those are supposed to be in the cockpit of my bird."

Heat didn't answer, but instead continued looking at the two photos Willis always flew into combat with: one of his son, Gabriel, the other of him and his wife, Natalie Cooper. Of course, now that she was dead, the pictures would take on renewed importance. "Trust me, you're not going to want to eat, anyway," Heat said quietly.

"What? Why not? I'm starved."

Brandon finally looked up to see the confused expression on Hawk's face.

"Willis, how the hell do I tell you this---?" Brandon began, looking away.

"Just say it, Brandon. What did I do?"

"Oh, Godâ€¦it's nothing _you_ did, Willisâ€¦"

"Then what's everyone's problem today? Jessica nearly broke into tears when I said hi!"

"Listen to me, Willis," Heat said, turning to face his friend again.

"I'm all ears."

"Last night after you sacked out, the rest of us hung out in the rec room. You know, like we always do."

"Yeahâ€¦" Willis had no idea where this conversation was going.

"Well, you know I never watch the news. And you also know why." _Crap, I really don't want to do this to him_, Brandon thought. _Because I know what it's like to be on the receiving end of news like this_.

"Look, Brandon, just tell me already. I'm sick of this beating around the bush and I want to get to the mess on time."

Lieutenant Heat sighed audibly and kept his voice level. "Sigma Octanus Four was invaded by the Covenant yesterday, Willis. They glassed the planet from orbit."

For a moment, Lieutenant Hawk simply stared, dumbfounded, at his wingmate.

"Willis, I'm so sorry, man, I'm so sorryâ€¦" Brandon said, repeating himself in what seemed like an endless cycle.

"Oh, my God," was the first thing Willis said when he regained speech. "N-Natalie isâ€¦is de---" The word caught in his throat, and he couldn't finish.

"I know, man, I know it's hard to believe, how awful it is to hear. I wish this weren't happening, Willis, I really do."

"No, the reports must be wrong. She can't beâ€¦she wouldn't get herself ki---" Willis had to stop again, and it was tearing Brandon apart to watch his friend suffer in front of him. "What about

Gabe?"

"He's in St. Louis, Willis, remember? Maybe you can get a couple days' leave to see him, he's just across the pond" Heat said softly.

"That's not what I meant. She wouldn't leave him. I know she wouldn't"

"She didn't have a choice, buddy, she didn't even have time to fight. The planet was---"

"I got it the first time, Brandon, and I don't want to hear it again," Willis said quietly. When he looked up to face Heat, Brandon could see tears glistening in his buddy's eyes. "God," Hawk said with a feeble chuckle. "I would have avoided me today, too."

"Christ, Willis, I really am sorry. I know what you're going through and it kills me."

"I know how rough it was for you to lose two girlfriends, Heat, but she's the mother of my child, Brandon. My wife. What am I going to do without her? What am I going to tell our son?"

"I don't know, man, I don't"

"She's my life. Her and Gabriel. I can't---" Willis choked on the words and struggled to keep his tears from falling.

"Listen, Willis, I'm going to go to the CO's office for you, all right? I'll explain what happened, and I'll see if I can get him to grant a request for you to go visit Gabe, ok?"

Willis simply nodded, unable to say anything for fear of losing what little self-control he had left.

"I'm really sorry, Willis," Brandon repeated as he walked out the door, placing the two photos on Hawk's bunk.

Burying his face in his hands, Willis didn't reply.

27. Chapter 26: SNAFU

Author's Note: Ok, I'm done having evil fun with my cliffhangers...for now. ;-) Thanks a bunch to all reviewers, you guys are super awesome!!! Please continue to R&R, cuz reviews equal great happiness. As always, hope you enjoy and peace!

P.S. Don't worry, the discrepancies between the Willis and Natalie parts will be cleared up as the story progresses. I guess you'll just have to stay tuned to find out what's really going on ;-)

P.P.S. To avoid confusion, I'd suggest looking carefully at the time-and-date headings.

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>Chapter Twenty-Six: SNAFU**

**1018 Hours, February 16, 2552. Europa Base, City of Cote D'Azur.
"The Big Bang," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. ****Day One of the Battle of
Sigma Octanus IV**

Pure agony was an odd feeling.

It started with the psychological symptoms first: screaming, sobbing, raging. Your emotional state would oscillate between intense sadness, anger, and fear. After that, things usually moved on to the physical symptoms: that sick feeling deep in your stomach, the incredible tightness in your chest, the dryness in your mouth and throat. Agony made you feel like you couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't _function_.

That's what the woman in front of me was experiencing right now. The brown-haired little kid with the gorgeous blue eyes I'd found near the bus stop bench?

Her son.

Lucky for me, in my twenty-four years of life, I'd never had to experience something quite as devastating as _pure_ agony. I'd seen and experienced a lot of terrible, traumatizing shit in this war, but nothing like what this woman was going through. I knew that if I had to choose one event that would completely shatter my world, one circumstance that would be my pure agony, it would most definitely be finding my son Gabriel lying dead on the sidewalk---or anywhere, for that matter. To lose my son, my _child_â€|that was far worse than anything I could imagine.

And so, it was hard for me to watch this mother, who had tried so hard to protect her son, break out into loud sobs as she knelt by the little boy's body.

"We need to get the rest of the civvies into that building," I said over the COM channel, to no one in particular.

"I'll handle it, El-Tee," Corporal Trevor Dandh, who was standing beside me, volunteered.

Most of the civilians had now been moved into the building I had found near the bus stop victim, and Doc Reynolds was close to finishing up with the seventeen immediate patients. There was still one more group of civvies to get into the building, however, and the boy's mother was stopping the flow of people.

It was horrible and heartless and cruel, but we had to keep the line moving. If the Covenant decided to attack now, they'd catch most of my platoon and the remaining civilians out in the open.

"Ma'am, I'm so sorry, but we need you to step into the building with the others," Dandh said, voice all calm. I knew better, though; when he'd first seen the boy's body, he'd vomited just as Hillburn had earlier near the fountain. And I didn't blame either of them one bit. Thankfully, my stomach had managed to hang in there for the time being, but I didn't know how long that would last.

The woman continued to wail and shout incoherent words. I watched the

corporal attempt to physically lift the mother, but she fought him as soon as she felt someone trying to take her away from her son.

I shut my eyes and glanced away, knowing I would do the same thing if I were in her shoes.

"Leave her, Dandh," I said quietly on a private channel.

I heard him stop struggling with the woman, and he radioed back, "Ma'am?"

"Tell your squad to have the line go around on the other side, and leave her alone."

"Lieutenant, you can't just---"

"I said leave her, Corporal. That's an order."

I heard a sigh come over the radio and Dandh turned his faceplate in my direction. I knew he wouldn't understand the order, but we both knew he was required to follow it.

"Yes, ma'am," he finally replied, and let go of the grieving woman.

That was when the unthinkable happened.

Still sobbing and babbling, the woman plucked Corporal Dandh's sidearm from its holster as he turned around, cocked the weapon as Dandh realized he was missing his pistol, and shot herself in the head before he could do anything about it.

The other frightened civilians screamed, some from witnessing the event, others from hearing the pistol's report. Me, I stopped in mid-stride, as I had nearly reached the corporal before the woman fired the shot.

"Dammit," I said inside my helmet. I didn't know why I'd thought I could've stopped the woman when Dandh had been closer and still hadn't managed, but I'd wanted to save her. Somehow.

Corporal Dandh and I looked at each other's faceplates for an instant, both sprayed with some of the woman's blood. Then my wits finally returned and I opened a channel to Petty Officer Reynolds.

"Medic outside, now!" I said, too much adrenaline pumping through my system to say more than the basic words.

Meanwhile, the corporal had finally regained speech and began to ramble. "Oh, my God. Holy shit, I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I'm sorry, I had no idea, I tried to stop her, she just grabbed---"

"First squad, up to my position. Lieutenant Hillburn?" I ordered over the platoon-wide channel.

"Yes, ma'am!" the young officer answered.

"Get third squad to usher those civvies into the building fast. Third platoon should be here soon. And try to calm the crowd down a

bit."

"Got it, El-Tee."

With my commands issued, I turned back to the corporal. "It wasn't your fault, Dandh. You couldn't have known what she was about to do."

"I was going to leave her alone, like you said, El-Tee. I swear!" Corporal Dandh exclaimed.

"I know, Dandh. But there's nothing we can do now. We need to focus on continuing our recon and getting back to base, Corporal."

He looked up at me, but I couldn't see his expression behind his visor. "Yes, ma'am," he finally replied.

"Lieutenant, what happened here?"

I was startled to hear Petty Officer Reynolds's voice beside me; I hadn't expected him to get here so quickly. By the time I started to answer, the medic was already kneeling next to the woman. Ignoring the gore, he immediately pressed two fingers against her neck.

"That boy by the bench is her son," I said, sounding like an automated voice. "She shot herself when she found him."

Doc Reynolds looked over his patient for a moment longer.

"Well, whatever the case, she's got no pulse," he said coolly. "She's dead, Lieutenant."

I nodded, feeling somehow detached. "Get back to the civvies then, Doc."

How the hell can you sound so calm?! was what I really wanted to scream at him. _That woman's brains are all over the sidewalk, and there's a gaping, bleeding hole in her head! Don't you see that people aren't supposed to look like this?!_

Of course, I was acting as though the scene were normal, too.

"Yes, ma'am," Reynolds said, responding to my order. He stood, wiped his now-bloodied gloves on his pants, and hurried back into the building.

First squad showed up as the medic was leaving, and I told them to move the bodies of the boy and his mother. The remaining civvies were already scared out of their wits, and it was all I could do to make sure my platoon was reassuring them. The removal of the two most gruesome victims would help keep the civilians moving into the building.

"Ma'am?" Lieutenant Hillburn radioed a few minutes later.

"Whatcha got for me, Hillburn?" I asked.

"The civvies are secure, El-Tee."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Glad to hear some good news,

Lieutenant. All right, then. Let's round up the platoon and get ready to move out."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Doc, how're we doing with the injured civvies?" I said, opening a private COM channel between Reynolds and myself.

"All seventeen patched up, ma'am. They're stable now."

"Great. Ok, Doc, assemble out here with the rest of the platoon. The Covenant are still in the city, and they're not gonna wait for us."

"Understood, El-Tee."

Just as Hillburn and I had finished assembling the platoon, third platoon came walking towards the building. They looked fresh because they hadn't run into Covenant air patrols yet.

"We'll take it from here, Cooper," Lieutenant Lewis said to me when he reached the building.

"Make sure you take care of the rest of the wounded civvies," I reminded him.

"Of course. I'll have my medic help out as many as she can, and then we'll hand over the remainder to Captain Kingston. Hopefully by then, those blokes at base will have figured out how to re-establish contact for a medevac."

"That's what we're counting on. Good luck, Dean."

"You, too, Natalie. I have a feeling we're all going to need it."

28. Chapter 27: Private Property

****Chapter Twenty-Seven: Private Property****

****Eight Years Earlier. 0705 Hours, September 23, 2544. Near Jameson High School, Emerald Pines. "The Meeting," Planet Mars. William Hawk's Memories****

Finally, senior year, Willis thought with a smile. _I'm going to take this new school by storm, be the star football player, pick up tons of girlsâ€|_

"Hey, Will," the girl beside him said, smirking. "Everyone's going to laugh at your stupid new haircut."

"Shut up, Jamie," Willis shot back, pulling his hood up and crossing his arms. "Mom! Why'd you have to bring _this_ car?"

"William, don't talk that way to your sister," his mother answered.

"She started it!"

"Did not!"

"Did, too!"

"Mom, Will's making faces at me!"

"William Peter! Do not make me stop this car! You are seventeen years old, now act like it!"

Jamie stuck her tongue out at her brother when she thought their mother wasn't looking. Willis was about to respond with a one-fingered salute when he was abruptly thrown forward in his seat.

"What the---!" he exclaimed.

"Out! All of you!" their mother said, turning around and giving her two oldest children an angry look.

"Mom---" Willis and Jamie began in unison.

"William, I already warned you," their mother said, looking at Willis. Then she turned to his sister and added, "And you, Jamie, are sixteen. You should both be ashamed of your behavior at your age." She let her two older children follow her gaze to the little boy sitting between them. "Matthew is barely six, and he's behaving much better than either of you!"

Matthew gave Jamie and Willis a smug smile and said nothing.

"You're not fooling anyone, Matt," Willis whispered in his brother's ear.

"What did you say, William?"

"Nothing, Mom."

"Good. Now, all three of you, out you go."

"It's freezing outside, Mom! And we've got blocks to go!" Jamie protested.

"Yeah, and I thought you were going to take Matthew to his new school," Willis put in.

"I have to get to work. His school is nearby and the directions are on your datapad. This will be a good chance for you three to learn to help each other instead of bicker all the time."

Jamie began unbuckling Matthew's seat belt, and opened up the car door. Cool fall air instantly flooded the vehicle, and Willis shivered.

"Can I just say how unfair this is?" he complained.

"Yes, you may. But you still have to get out."

Willis gave his mother an annoyed look, but started getting out of the car; his siblings were already waiting for him. He was about to shut the door when he heard his mother call his name.

"Yeah, Mom?" he said, sticking his head back in the car.

"Take care of them, William. And keep a subtle watch on your sister, will you?"

What Willis really wanted to do was roll his eyes, but he muttered a quick, "Ok, bye," instead. He shut the door and began walking with Jamie and Matthew.

They had gone a few blocks without speaking, heading towards Matthew's school, before Jamie broke the silence.

"See, Will? None of this would've happened if you hadn't totaled the other car over the summer," she said.

"Yeah, well, what's keeping you from getting a license?" Willis retorted.

"Um, maybe the fact that we no longer have that car."

Willis didn't reply. Instead, he looked down at Matthew and said, "Hey, Matt, where was my back-up today, kid?"

The little boy shrugged. "Sorry, Will, but it was the first time you two got in trouble instead of me." He grinned up at his older brother.

Willis and Jamie looked at each other and smiled. Matthew always said the funniest things, and he wasn't even completely aware of his wit yet.

Willis ruffled his younger brother's hair and said, "Oh, yeah?"

Matthew simply continued to grin.

"Uh-oh," Jamie said, giving her older brother a look.

"Yup," Willis replied, nodding sagely.

"Oh, no!" Matthew cried, picking up on what was happening.

"You know what we have to do to you now, little bro," Jamie said.

"Always gotta have our back, little buddy," Willis added.

"No, no, no, no, no!" Matthew cried. He tried to run, but Willis caught him in one long stride.

"I got 'im!" Willis shouted. "I'll hold him down!"

"Ok, Matt, here goes!"

"No!"

Jamie started tickling their little brother, and he giggled and kicked wildly.

"Get off! Come on, Jamie! Will, help me!" Matthew yelled between peals of high-pitched laughter.

By now, all three Hawk children were laughing. Trying to catch her older brother by surprise, Jamie let go of Matthew, who was giggling like crazy, and grabbed a handful of leaves on the ground. Willis saw the multicolored leaves coming at his face a second too late, and didn't have time to duck out of the way.

"Hey!" he cried.

"Come get me if you can!" his sister called out, starting to run up the street.

Willis shook the leaves off his jacket and looked at his little brother. "Ready to go catch her, Matt?"

"Yeah!" the boy exclaimed, grinning ear to ear.

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After dropping their younger brother off at the nearby elementary school, Jamie and Willis kept on walking towards Jameson High School. It was supposedly only a few blocks north of Matthew's school, but it seemed to be taking much longer to actually get there. Willis was beginning to wonder whether they'd gotten lost.

The Hawk family had moved to Emerald Pines from the other side of Mars in the early summer. A few months before, Willis's parents, both civilian engineers working with the UNSC, had received promotions. Of course, one of the perks had been a move to a new city with higher paychecks all around; Willis's parents had accepted the offer immediately. Sure, it was strange leaving your house, friends, and neighbors, but for the most part, the family found the prospect of living in a new place exciting.

Finally reaching the high school, Jamie and Willis parted ways after getting their respective schedules. Most of the day dragged by slowly, and Willis found himself yawning a lot. Maybe even a little too much, seeing as one of his AI teachers singled him out for not paying attention. Willis simply shrugged it off; it was only the first day, after all.

When school ended for the day, it was raining. Willis found Jamie and they waited together under the front building's roof, hoping their mother would show up to get them soon. The two siblings were chatting casually about their day when Jamie suddenly squinted and said, "Is thatâ€|? It is!"

Willis tried to follow his sister's gaze. "Huh?"

"That girl down there, standing in the rain with her umbrella? She's my friend from that track team I was on over the summer. She's a year older than me, though. I'd go down and say hi, but I don't want to get all wet."

"Maybe she needs a ride," Willis said, looking down at the girl. "What'd you say her name was?"

"Why don't you go find out?"

Willis gave his younger sister a look, but she just grinned.

Shaking his head, Willis walked out from underneath the roof and into the pouring rain. By the time he walked the several yards to where the girl was standing, he was soaking wet.

"Excuse me?" he said, wondering for the millionth time why he was doing this.

The girl turned around, and his brain felt like it had just shut down.

Struck by her long brown hair and sparkling green eyes, he thought her pretty at once. She may not have been the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen, but she certainly seemed the type to get a few second looks. She smiled pleasantly at him, and he could have sworn his heart stopped. "Hi. Do I know you?"

"Yes," Willis answered in a rush. "I mean, no, not really, but I think you know my sister."

The girl gave him a questioning look. "Oh, yeah? What's your sister's name?"

"Uh, Jamie. Jamie Hawk."

The girl's smile returned, and Willis had that same feeling of his heart arresting. "Jamie? Of course I know her!" The girl looked up to where his sister was standing and waved. Jamie waved back.

"She said she would've come down if it weren't raining," Willis explained.

"That's ok, I understand." The girl turned back to face him, and seemed to realize for the first time that he was all wet. "So why did you come down here?"

Willis's throat felt scratchy all of a sudden. "Um, I was actually wondering if you needed a ride." He smiled sheepishly. "'Course it'll be my mom's old car that doesn't even drive itself anymore, but it sure beats walkin'."

The girl laughed. "Sounds great. But unfortunately I've already got someone coming."

"Oh," Willis said, feeling stupid. "Right. Well, that's cool. Guess I'll just head back up top then." He turned to leave.

"You could wait with me, you know," he heard her say behind him.

Willis grinned to himself before turning back around. "Sure. So, uh, what's your name?"

"Natalie Cooper," the girl said, holding out her hand.

"Willis Hawk," Willis replied. He took her hand and shook it---and

realized too late that he'd gotten her hand all wet.
"Sorryâ€|"

"Don't worry about it," the girl replied with a sweet smile. "So? Your sister tells me you guys are new here."

"Yeah, just moved from Togeesa, up in the mountains."

"Really? I don't think I've ever been there." She paused, then added, "My dad'sâ€|well, my dad _was_ in the UNSC Navy. And my mom's a scientist. So we've moved around a lot."

"Yeah? I guess your dad's out of the Navy now, huh?" Willis asked, noting the fact that she'd used the past tense.

Her expression changed, and after a moment's hesitation, she began to reply, "Actually, he---"

"Hey, Natalie!" a voice came from behind them. Willis and Natalie turned to see another young man walking up. With his brown hair and brown eyes, the newcomer was strikingly handsome.

"Ethan!" Natalie exclaimed when she saw him. He walked up to her, completely ignoring Willis, and kissed her.

Willis's heart sank.

"Ready to go?" Ethan asked, putting his arms around her and kissing her again, this time on the cheek.

Natalie giggled and said, "Yeah."

Finally realizing a third person was standing beside them, Ethan looked at Willis. He lifted his head at the new kid and then glanced at Natalie. "Who's this?"

Was it just Willis's imagination, or did he hear a certainâ€|tightness in Ethan's words?

"Oh, this is Willis Hawk. He's Jamie's brother. Remember her, my friend from track?"

"Yeah," Ethan seemed to grumble. Staring daggers at Willis while at the same time giving him a friendly smile, Ethan said, "Nice to meet you, Hawk. I'm Ethan Ackerson."

"It's nice to meet you, too," Willis replied out of courtesy.

Then he processed Ethan's last name.

"Wait, is your dad---?"

"Colonel James Ackerson? You got it. Well, Natalie and I have to get going now," Ethan said rapidly, still with that strange nice-hate expression on his face. He looked at Natalie and asked, "Right?"

Willis caught the look of slight discomfort on Natalie's face. "Right, Ethan." She smiled at Willis again, though this time it seemed forced. "I'll, um, see you later."

"Yeah, sure. Bye," Willis said, turning around and taking his leave. As he walked back to where his sister sat waiting under the roof, he thought about Ethan's odd behavior. Some hostility could have been deemed natural between a girl's boyfriend and an unknown guy, but Willis didn't like the way Natalie had acted once Ethan arrived. She had seemed more reserved and less willing to show an acknowledgement of Willis's presence, when before she had been friendly and talkative.

But, when Willis made it back to his sister, he decided it was only his imagination. What did he know about those two, anyway? There was a simple explanation somewhere, perhaps one Willis simply couldn't see.

"How did it go, Will?" Jamie asked him as he approached.

"Well, I'm dripping wet, she said no about the ride, and her boyfriend showed up," Willis answered, doing his best to feign dejection. Then he looked up and grinned. "Still, I think it was worth it just to meet her."

29. Chapter 28: Between a Rock

****Chapter Twenty-Eight: Between a Rock and a Hard Place****

****1056 Hours, February 16, 2552. ****Europa Base, City of Cote D'Azur. ****"The Nature of the Beast," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. ****Day One of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV****

Once again, first platoon was leading the charge for Bravo Company. Upon leaving the building with the civvies, we'd been attacked twice by Covenant air support; still, with only a couple of Marines with minor wounds, we considered ourselves extremely lucky.

But here in the outskirts of the city, things were just getting started.

We had managed to walk for another forty minutes before I noticed something wasn't right up ahead. I could hear a distant rumbling through my helmet's audio pick-up, and I could see faint shapes moving against a not-quite-normal background. I opened a COM channel to my platoon and ordered them to halt. In the meantime, I produced my field binoculars from my pocket, and tried to scout the area forward of our position.

My worst fears were realized when I saw that that distant rumbling came from a Wraith tank. And those ambiguous shapes dancing across an abnormal backdrop? A large Covenant patrol team, including ten Grunts, six Jackals, four Elites, and three Brutes. A few Drones were circling above as well, just for good measure.

"First platoon, halt and take cover," I ordered over the platoon-wide channel. I moved out from the middle of the street, in case the Covenant could see me, and crouched behind a half-melted parked car. Calling up a map of this part of the city on my datapad, I tried to find the best route to the aliens while maintaining the element of surprise.

Even the suburbs of Cote D'Azur were little more than a series of mazes, what with all the side streets and alleys. And now that we were closer than ever to the heart of the city, the roads were even more cramped together; that could possibly work in our favor. We could also go through the sewer system, but that would be difficult and less pragmatic. So back streets it was.

"Second squad, listen up," I said over the SQUADCOM. "See that big white and blue GalaCorp building, two blocks up?"

I waited for acknowledgement lights to wink, then continued. "I want you to get into that building, clear it out, and take the stairs to the roof. I don't know if the Covies have long-distance audio sensors, so you're going to have to use your legs---no elevators. Now, once you're up there, I want two sniper teams posted on the two corners of the building facing the Covie patrol. Gunny?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Notify me when you're set up. Get moving."

Gunnery Sergeant Hills's acknowledgement light winked, and I watched on my HUD as ten yellow blips raced across my radar. Slinging my shotgun on my shoulder and holding my battle rifle to bear instead, I switched COM channels. This time, I included only first and third squads.

"Ok, Marines, here's the deal. We've got twenty-plus enemy troops several yards ahead, right where the houses start to pop up again. Hiding just before that break from the commercial buildings is a Wraith tank. We don't have many rockets left, and I'd like to save those for the Banshee patrols. So this is what we're going to doâ€¦"

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As two of my squads and I walked through the alleys between corporate buildings, I had to admit my plan wasn't all that elaborate. Basically, it included sneaking up to the large alien group and unloading on them, using the urban landscape for cover. Meanwhile, second squad, waiting on the rooftop for my signal, would provide cover fire with their snipers. I wasn't sure how this would turn out, but I hoped it would work.

Leading the group of twenty Marines, ten on each side of the street, I crouched when we came within three city blocks of the Covenant. Through a small optical cord I sent around corners, I could see the Grunts being pushed around by the Elites and Brutes; the Drones buzzed around the general area, and the Jackals paced back and forth. I wondered why they were staying put instead of actively seeking us out, but I decided that it wasn't important for now.

This skirmish was going to be difficult to negotiate, even with half a platoon of Marines. Timing had to be perfect, since we were not only going up against a tank on foot, but also the Covenant's toughest ground troops, as well.

"Second squad, standby for orders," I radioed, keeping my voice low despite speaking inside my helmet. I waited for acknowledgements,

then motioned the ten Marines with me to move up through the alley. As I walked behind them, I opened a new channel to Hillburn, in charge of the Marines on the opposite side of the street.

"Lieutenant, get ready. We'll try to sneak up behind the tank, take it out first, then flank the rest. The second that Wraith's out of commission, the snipers will help pick off the bigger targets. Wait for my signal."

"Yes, ma'am," the young officer replied, her voice revealing her anticipation.

Taking point again for first squad, I walked cautiously around the edge of the Covenant perimeter. As my Marines and I rounded the corner, still bent on getting behind the Covie tank, I unconsciously held my breath.

But that wasn't enough to stop a curious Grunt from catching a glimpse of us.

The small alien suddenly jumped, waving its arms frantically in the air and starting a scene. I quickly pulled my silenced pistol from its holster and shot the Grunt twice with my right hand, holding my battle rifle in my left. The alien went down with a spray of blood and a silent _thud_, and I prayed the rest of the patrol hadn't seen its fit.

Today wasn't going to be my lucky day.

Of all the Covenant that could have possibly noticed an overly excited Grunt, a Brute was just about the worst one you could hope for. Sadly, that's exactly what I got.

"Snipers open up! We've been compromised!" I managed to yell through the COM before a flaming piece of ordnance propelled itself my way.

I threw myself onto the ground, listening to the _whooshing_ sound of the Brute shot round as it flew past my head. The explosion knocked off a dozen bricks and shattered the glass of the old house behind first squad and I, but luckily we were all wearing strong armor.

I didn't wait for the debris to stop raining down on me to get up and fire my battle rifle at the Brute. If I allowed him a second shot while I was still lying on the ground, he wouldn't miss.

"First squad, find cover and engage! Third squad, you'd better take care of that Wraith or we're cooked!" I shouted into the COM.

The ten Marines behind me rapidly dispersed, looking for more ideal locations to join in the fight. Since I was already in the Brute's sights, however, I had to take the alien out before I could move on.

Crouched in the dirty alleyway and hiding behind a dumpster surrounded by rotting refuse, I fired two three-round bursts at the Brute that had first spotted us. The alien's armor blew off in pieces as each bullet searched for flesh, but he was well-protected. The Brute roared and shook with anger, then started running right for

me.

I rose quickly to backpedal out of its way, but the burly alien wasn't about to let me go. Knowing I would be faster, it simply stopped charging and fired another shot from its weapon. The round hit the front of the dumpster, blowing it to pieces and sending garbage everywhere. The explosion threw me off my feet, and I finally landed on my back in a large puddle of stagnant rainwater.

Soaked head to toe and fighting the sudden pain coursing through my body, I shook my head slightly to clear my blurry vision. I could see the Brute coming towards me, checking to see if I was dead, and I also saw that my battle rifle and pistol were far from where I'd ended up. The only weapons I was left with now were my knives.

Shit, how the fuck do I take down a Brute with nothing but combat knives? I thought frantically. It would have taken more than several rounds of rifle fire to take the beast down, its hide was so thick. What was a five-inch blade going to do, besides tickle it?

That's when I felt the familiar weight of a shotgun on my back.

_Thank God I picked up _two_ weapons in the armory_, I thought to myself.

Still lying in the nasty old water, I kept myself as motionless as possible. I'd wait until the Brute got closer, then sling the shotgun off my back and give him a twelve-gauge surprise. With its frontal armor shot off, even a Brute didn't stand a chance against a shotgun blast that close.

The huge alien took another few steps, and though I couldn't see what passed for its face, I could certainly sense that it was watching me for any slight movement. I'd have to be fast---real fast.

With another two steps, the Brute was almost upon me.

Suddenly rolling my upper body forward, I grabbed my shotgun and held the weapon to bear in one lightning-quick motion. I aimed at the ugly Brute, enraged that its prey had outsmarted him, and I fired a shell into its unprotected chest. Dark purple blood and chunks of flesh came bursting through the air, and I pulled the trigger a second time, just for good measure.

The hulking beast let out a pained roar, then staggered backward and fell into the pile of blown-up garbage.

I finally got up from the backed-up drainage grate and stood over the Brute to make sure I'd killed it. When it didn't immediately attempt to slaughter me, I knew it was dead.

Pulse pounding in my ears from the adrenaline, I wiped the water from my visor and stood there a moment, catching my breath. That had been one hell of a close call.

"Lieutenant!" a voice crackled in my helmet.

"Report," I replied, jogging out of the dirty alleyway.

"Wraith's been taken care of, ma'am," Lieutenant Hillburn announced. "The Covenant hadn't spotted our squad yet, but it still took a lot of grenades and some careful maneuvering."

I allowed myself a small smile. "Good work, Hillburn. Let's concentrate our fire on the rest of 'em."

"Got it, El-Tee."

Coming out into the main street after gathering my lost weapons, I saw the huge Wraith tank smoking a few yards away; the bodies of two dead Elites lay limp in the wreckage. Thankfully, the hardest part was done.

I ran to the nearest source of cover, which happened to be a scorched vehicle, and peaked over the top. Most of the Drones had been eliminated by now, and a second Brute looked like it had been sniped. I could see, however, that the two squads of Marines were still firing on several other aliens. The skirmish was winding down, but not over.

Holstering my pistol once more, and slinging my shotgun across my back, I stood to my full height over the vehicle I was using as cover. Using my battle rifle's scope, I quickly took aim at a group of Grunts harassing a fireteam from first squad. I squeezed off four three-round bursts, and took down three of the annoying little creatures.

I ducked back behind the car as plasma fire and needles started coming my way. I reloaded my battle rifle, and, going prone, crawled to the side of the vehicle. Observing the scene from under the front bumper, I saw one of my Marines toss a frag grenade at the three Grunts and lone Jackal giving me hell. The Grunts cried out and the Jackal jumped sideways, but it was no use. Two Grunts went up in bloody fragments, and one ran straight into a Marine's submachine gun fire. The Jackal's shield flared red but held.

When the alien turned its back on me in an attempt to get away from the other Marines, I popped back out from cover and shot the alien in the neck.

Just two more Elites and one Brute to go.

A few yards from my position, first and third squads were already attacking the three big aliens from both sides of the street. As much as the three Covenant warriors growled and fought, they were surrounded; this made them easy kills for our sniper team.

I ran out from the vehicle I'd been behind and joined the other Marines in unloading rounds on the Elites and Brute, but each was sniped in quick succession.

The skirmish had come to an end.

"Squad leaders, give me your status," I said over the radio, crouching in the open and looking around for any concealed targets.

"First squad all present, no casualties, ma'am," Corporal Dandh

replied.

"Second squad all present, nobody hurt, Lieutenant," Gunnery Sergeant Hills reported.

"Third squad all present and ok, El-Tee," Second Lieutenant Hillburn answered.

"Reynolds?" I asked.

"Confirmed, ma'am. No wounded," the petty officer responded.

"All right. Great job, everybody. Let's grab any supplies we can off these dead Covies and keep on truckin'," I ordered over the COM channel. "Second squad, rendezvous with first and third at our location." After uploading a map and a blinking objective marker to the sniper team, I stood and walked over to Hillburn.

"That was definitely a nail-biter, El-Tee," she said to me, raising her faceplate to wipe the sweat on her forehead.

"No kidding," I answered, lifting my own visor. Now that the fight had ended and my mind wasn't focused solely on survival, I began to feel very uncomfortable in my wet clothing. The damn Brute just had to shove me in a stinking puddle, didn't he?

"How the hell'd you end up dripping wet, ma'am?"

"Apparently Brutes like pool parties, Lieutenant. And there's always more fun to be had when you've got a guest."

When she gave me a confused look, I pointed to the alleyway, where trash, rubble, and dark-colored water could be seen in every filthy little crack.

"The bastard launched an explosive right at the dumpster, and I wound up near the grate," I explained.

Hillburn followed my gaze, then made a face. "Well, as disgusting as that sounds, at least you weren't thrown into a sewer."

Despite it all, I couldn't help but grin. "See? There's always something to be thankful for."

The young lieutenant was about to reply when I heard Kingston's voice come through my COM.

"Lieutenant Cooper."

I held up a finger for Hillburn to stop whatever she was going say, then answered, "Yes, sir?"

"Good news. We've managed to re-establish contact with Europa Base. They've been under attack since after we moved out, but they're hanging on for now."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir."

"I was also able to convince one of the officers in charge of the motor pool to send up some troop carrier 'Hogs. The civvies you

placed in the building were evacuated, and they all made it out. Including the wounded."

A wide grin formed on my face. "That's definitely good news, Captain."

"I wanted to thank you for your part in making the evacuation a success. And tell that medic of yours that his efforts saved the lives of a lot of those civvies."

"Thank you, sir, but it was really the doing of my platoon. I'll pass on the compliments to Reynolds and the others."

"You do that, Lieutenant." There was a brief pause, and I thought he'd cut the connection. I was starting to turn back towards Hillburn when Captain Kingston's voice returned. "Oh, and Cooper?"

"Yes, sir?"

"One more thing. A man named Greg Howard wanted me to tell you that he found his wife and two girls. They were reunited before the Warthogs left, and they're all alive and doing well."

I took a deep breath, controlling the emotion in my voice before replying, "Thank you, sir."

"No problem. Now, I should be receiving additional orders from Europa Base as the Covenant forces get larger. In the meantime, I want you to continue your original mission and forge ahead. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

"All right. Kingston out."

30. Chapter 29: My Knight In Shining Armor

Author's Note: Here's the next chapter, and I hope you enjoy it. Please let me know how I'm doing, as feedback is very helpful and awesome! Also, please tell me if I'm updating too fast. The story is here for you, the reader, after all. ;-)

Please please please review and peace!

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>Chapter Twenty-Nine: My Knight in Shining Armor**

Seven and a Half Years Earlier. September 2544 - February 2545. Hawk Residence, Emerald Pines. "The Rescue," Planet Mars. William Hawk's Memories

Over the next several months, Willis's younger sister Jamie and Natalie, the girl he'd met that day in the cold rain, became best friends.

And that meant Willis got to see her all the time.

Between occasional greetings at school and the hours Natalie would spend at the Hawk's home hanging out with Jamie, she had quickly befriended Willis, as well. She also enjoyed playing with Matthew, who thought she was the best of all his older siblings' friends.

There was only one thing keeping Willis from being more than the guy Natalie said hi to because he was her friend's brother---and that was Ethan. Willis had taken note that it was not Natalie's parents or Natalie herself that drove up to the Hawk's home, but her boyfriend. He was always there to drop her off and pick her up, and they always spoke in his idling car before she got out. But, again, Willis didn't know Natalie nearly as well as Jamie knew her, and he had had no further contact with Ethan. Besides, it wasn't like there was anything at all suspicious about the things Willis was seeing. He just knew he had this nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right.

Over the course of a few weeks, Willis began noticing that Natalie would keep her words to him---or any other guy she spoke to besides Ethan---at a bare minimum at school. While at his house, she would be courteous and talk to him if he initiated the conversation; for the most part, however, she wouldn't actively seek to interact with him. There were many normal explanations for her behavior, but she certainly wasn't acting like the Natalie he'd met at the school's entrance that day.

Some time later, Willis thought he would ask Jamie about it. When she said she had no idea what he was talking about, Willis decided it must be all in his head. Weeks continued to go by.

Then came the first time he noticed the bruises on her arms and face.

Natalie would later tell him they'd been there since just before they'd met, but Willis had never paid that close attention; she was skilled at hiding them. When he got up the nerve to inquire about them, she had smiled and said, "Oh, you know. Tripped over a hurdle yesterday at track practice. Looks bad, I know, but it didn't really hurt that much."

Willis knew the story didn't match the injuries, but there wasn't much he could do. He didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable by making accusations against people he didn't know that well. So he stayed silent, and pretended nothing weird was happening.

He'd come to deeply regret his decision when Natalie showed up unexpectedly at his doorstep one day.

He was home alone that afternoon. His parents were working, Jamie was at track, and Matthew was at a friend's house. He heard the chime ring and was surprised when the basic house AI informed him that "Cooper, Natalie" was waiting outside. Perplexed, especially since he couldn't see Ethan's car, Willis opened the door. He had no idea what to expect.

"Hey, Natalie. Sorry, but Jamie's at track. Aren't you supposed to be there, too?" Willis asked. It was only when he stopped talking that he realized there were tears coming down her face. As soon as she

The next time Willis would see Natalie was the next day, when his mother said there was a phone call for him.

"Hello?" Willis said, picking up the call on his datapad.

"Willis, this is Natalie's mother Lisa. Listen, she's in the hospital right now, and she asked me to call you."

Willis went cold. "Is she ok?"

"The doctor said she's stable now, but she would like you to be here."

"Yeah, sure. I'll be right over. What happened?"

"She was mugged yesterday. Ethan found her and immediately had an ambulance come get her, but..." He heard Natalie's mother's voice quiver. "She was in such bad shape"

"I understand. I'll be there." Willis had to concentrate to keep the anger out of his voice. He knew Natalie hadn't been mugged, that it was really Ethan who'd beaten her.

Arriving at the hospital ten minutes later, Willis was finally ushered to Natalie's room by the medical staff. And what he saw he would keep in his memory forever.

Black and swollen sockets surrounded her lovely green eyes. Her lips were cracked with dried blood, one of her wrists was in a cast, and she had nasty bruises on her arms. Willis could only imagine what further injuries lurked beneath her hospital gown.

"Hey," she said weakly, trying to curl her mouth into a smile.

Willis walked slowly up to her bed and, looking back at the door to make sure they were alone, whispered, "Jesus Christ, Natalie. What did he do to you?"

Her smile vanished. "He erupted when he found out I was at your house alone."

Willis could feel the blood leave his face.

Seeing him visibly pale, Natalie reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze. "I'm all right, Willis. Don't worry about it."

Willis shook his head. "No, you're not all right," he said firmly. "Natalie, this is not all right. You're getting out of this now. He is out of control. Out of control."

Natalie let go of his hand and looked down. "But" She swallowed hard. "He said he was sorry, Willis."

"Sorry? Natalie, look at what he did to you! You think 'sorry' covers it? He'll only do this again!" Willis was beyond angry, and he realized it was coming out in his words. But, somehow, he got the feeling she knew his anger was directed at Ethan, that he wasn't mad at her. "Please, Natalie," he pleaded, speaking softly this time. "Get yourself out. I can't stand seeing you suffer like

this."

Natalie nodded in agreement and looked at him, tears welling up in her eyes. "Thanks for being here, Willis."

Despite his initial shock, he gave her a weak smile. "Of course. Where else would I be when you need me?"

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Several days later, Willis got the news that Natalie had finally been released from the hospital. When he saw her at school, she seemed to be doing better and looked much happier. Her eyes lit up when she saw him across the way, and she waved.

"I told them," she said when they reached each other. "I told the doctors, and they told the police. They'll be coming for him today." Her lower lip began to tremble and tears started rolling down her cheeks. "It's finally over."

This time, Willis knew what to do when he saw her crying. Careful not to touch her still-healing bruises, he gently wrapped his arms around her as she buried her face in his chest.

"You did the right thing, Natalie. He doesn't really love you, no matter what he says. He wouldn't do this to you if he did."

"Hey, asshole! Get your hands off my girlfriend!" an angry voice shouted behind them.

Natalie's face shot up to look in the direction of the voice, and she let out a small gasp when she saw it was Ethan.

Willis, still holding onto her, turned so that he stood between her and the fast-approaching Ethan. Willis glared at the other young man and said, "Who're you calling an asshole, you lunatic! Don't you see what you did to her?"

"She deserved it!" Ethan spat back.

That was when Willis had had enough. He let go of Natalie, stormed the last few steps separating him from Ethan, and punched the other young man in the face.

"No one deserves what you did! You put her in the hospital, for Christ's sake! Why would she want to stay with you when you're nothing but an abusive freak?"

"You stole my girlfriend!" Ethan said, taking a swing at Willis. Willis ducked and drove his fist into Ethan's stomach.

"She came to me for help!" Willis said, standing over Ethan, who crumpled on the ground. "And don't you ever, _ever_ come near her again. Do you understand me?"

Ethan sat up on the grass and held his now-bleeding nose. "This isn't over," he growled.

Five minutes later, he was handcuffed and placed into the back of a police car.

31. Chapter 30: Heart of a City

Author's Note: Thank you so much for the feedback, everyone! Your comments really mean a lot, so basically you guys rock! ;-) Hope you continue to enjoy, please please review, and, of course, peace!

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>Chapter Thirty: Heart of a City**

1204 Hours, February 16, 2552. Europa Base, City of Cote D'Azur. "The Assembly," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. Day One of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV

Second squad joined us during my chat with Captain Kingston, and then it was back to dodging Covenant air patrols. The heart of the huge city loomed just a few clicks away, and the tall and tightly-packed buildings surrounding us now was a testament to that fact.

Our platoon had encountered one more enemy ground patrol while we marched. This time, the Covies had brought along a pair of Hunters, making the third skirmish of the day the most challenging so far. But, with the help of the snipers in second squad, we'd managed to get out all right.

The day was halfway over, and first platoon still boasted its original group of Marines.

I just hope the rest of the day goes this well, I thought, sweeping my battle rifle left and right as I walked. You never knew where your next killer alien could come from these days.

After a short march, I finally saw what I had been looking for up ahead. It was a sign that read: COTE D'AZUR CITY LIMITS. We had made it.

"First platoon, halt. We've reached the city, and this place will be crawling with Covenant. Keep your eyes and ears sharp and check your weapons while we wait. Standby for orders," I said over the platoon-wide channel. As acknowledgement lights winked green, I switched channels to radio the captain.

He beat me to it.

"Cooper, this is Captain Kingston."

"Sir?"

"Stop wherever you are, Lieutenant. There's been a change in plans."

"What's going on, Captain?"

I heard Kingston sigh on the other end. "I'm not sure what to make of this information, Cooper. But Europa Base says they've been keeping an eye on media coverage of the invasion."

"Sir? All due respect, but since when does civilian news count as intel?"

"It's a damned miracle our company reestablished contact with base, Lieutenant. We're all still cut off from other groundside units." There was a pause before he continued. "The reports are grim, Cooper. The media announced that the entire planet has been glassed."

What? _That can't possibly be right...I'm standing here right now!_ I thought. To Kingston, I replied, "Um...last time I checked, I'm still alive and breathing, sir."

"Same here. The report is obviously distorted, but base thinks some other parts of the planet could have truly been glassed. Therefore Europa no longer needs a recon mission, Lieutenant. It looks like we could be the last sector of Sigma Octanus Four still standing. This is now a full-scale battle for the whole base—and the planet itself." Captain Kingston gave me a moment to take it all in. The news was beyond surprising. "Do you understand the gravity of the situation, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. Of course."

"Good. Here are your orders, Lieutenant: stay put and send me a map with your position. Third platoon will be arriving there shortly, and we'll follow with second. I want you to find a place for a briefing in the meantime. Bravo Company will take on the Covenant in the city together. Clear?"

"Consider it done, Captain."

"Excellent. Kingston out."

The connection cut, and I was left standing there, trying to make sense of what he'd said. If Europa Base and our company were the only UNSC forces left on a mostly-glassed planet, we were pretty much screwed. And why did the Covenant leave only the city of Cote D'Azur untouched? Something here wasn't adding up.

With my platoon still halted, I uploaded the map Kingston had requested and sent the information to his datapad and HUD. Then, I ordered Hillburn to watch first platoon while I searched for a briefing room.

During my search, I had a sudden and horrible thought: what if my husband had seen the initial---and wrong---media report that said all of Sigma Octanus IV had been glassed? Or my mother? _They'll think I'm dead, and there's not even a way for me to let them know I'm still alive. But, judging by what Kingston said, I'm not sure any of us will survive much longer anyway. As soon as the Covies get what they want here, they'll finish the job._ And suddenly, everything was clear to me.

One way or another, we had to keep the Covenant out of the city.

Our very lives depended on it.

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Only Captain Kingston, Lieutenants Lewis and Graham, and I were at the briefing. The company's three second lieutenants were maintaining a small perimeter, each with their respective platoon. This way, in case a sudden Banshee attack wiped out the room Bravo's top officers were in, the company wasn't left without leaders.

The briefing, which was being held in someone's empty cellar, started as soon as Captain Kingston arrived with second platoon. The captain began by explaining Europa Base's news about media reports in further detail. Our company commanding officer also told us that Europa was currently in the middle of its own battle and fighting off wave after wave of Covenant attacks.

"This means," Captain Kingston continued, "that it is up to Bravo Company to drive the Covenant out of Cote D'Azur. After we accomplish that, Europa will hopefully break through the enemy lines so we can merge our forces once again." The captain looked each of us in the eye with a small smile on his face. "That's when we shove the alien bastards back into orbit. Questions?"

"What's the plan, Captain?" Lieutenant Graham asked, holding her assault rifle close.

"Like I said, first we have to get the Covies out. That's our top priority for now, designated 'Phase One'. The next step, 'Phase Two', is to maintain a perimeter around the city so that they can't get their hands on whatever it is they want. 'Phase Three': we reconnect with Europa's remaining troops and force the Covenant off the planet."

"Estimates on the enemy's numbers, sir?" Lieutenant Lewis inquired.

"That's what our job was supposed to be, Lewis. We've managed to get our air support up, but they've had a helluva rough time. Their presence has greatly reduced the number of Banshee patrols for us, but of course now our flyboys have to deal with 'em. That means no aerial recon until the skies are cleared out."

"This is an invasion, sir. I'd expect the numbers to be pretty high. Too high for one cut-off company, Captain," Graham added.

"We'll do what we can to protect the city, the evacuated civvies, and the base. No matter what," Kingston said.

"Yes, sir," the three of us answered.

"Anything else?" the captain asked.

"Sir, the invasion was unexpected, and the majority of us left base with little equipment. How long can we last without reinforcement and resupply?" I asked him.

"Don't worry, Cooper. When Europa sent those Warthogs for the

civvies, they also sent up supplies. We have enough ammo, rations, and water for about two weeks. Even with the forces we're facing, that should see us through until we hook back up with base." Captain Kingston glanced around. Lieutenant Graham was frowning, Lewis looked pensive, and I kept my face carefully neutral. Finally, our CO said, "Well, that's all I've got for you. Brief your second lieutenants, prepare your platoons, and let's get this show on the road."

32. Chapter 31: Rollercoaster Love

Author's Note: Hope you're all resting easier now that you know Cooper's still alive. ;-) Please please review, hope you have a pleasant reading experience, and peace!

P.S. I apologize about the glassing thing in the last chapter, I guess I'm not exactly sure how it all works. But in the interest of carrying on the story, I'm going to twist the realities of such an event a bit. ;-)

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>Chapter Thirty-One: Rollercoaster Love**

Interlude. February 2545 â€" April 2549. "The Aftermath," Planet Mars/Reach. William Hawk's Memories

Weeks had gone by since the whole nightmare with Ethan ended, yet some scars remained. They weren't physical scars; Natalie had eventually made a full recovery in that respect. The scars that were left behind were emotional ones, and those took much, much longer to heal.

After Ethan was arrested, Willis didn't see Natalie for quite some time. She wouldn't even look at him at school, and she didn't come by the house. She had, however, apparently spoken to Jamie, because his sister informed the family that Natalie had said she'd need some time alone.

No one other than Willis knew about Ethan, and that would continue to hold true even up to the present day. This meant that no one knew about the bond Willis and Natalie had formed; his parents and siblings couldn't understand why he moped around the house like a lovesick puppy when Natalie was _Jamie's_ friend.

But they were right about one thing: he _was_ lovesick. After all they'd been through together, Willis had fallen hard for Natalie Cooper. And before they had temporarily parted ways, she had admitted to falling for him, as well. Why, then, he had wondered, couldn't they be together if they loved each other?

The answer had been simple, of course, but it had still been hard for Willis to hear: Natalie told him she wasn't ready for a relationship immediately following her ordeal. So Willis waited, knowing Natalie had every right to her space after what had happened but also knowing the separation was killing him.

Luckily, the wait was shorter than it could have been. In a few

months, Natalie was back at the Hawk household, and though she was still emotionally damaged, she was now willing to accept Willis's help. There was only one condition: Willis was sworn to secrecy about what had occurred, and so they came up with a story to explain her break-up with Ethan.

Explaining the fact that Willis and Natalie were now dating was easier to do than thinking of a story for the Ethan mess. Jamie was stunned at first, as she had come to believe that Natalie had no interest whatsoever in her brother, but things soon returned to normal. Willis's parents still treated Natalie like a second daughter, except that now there were strict rules about her and Willis being alone in the house.

Meanwhile, Ethan was convicted of assault and battery, though he served little of his sentence due to the influential power of his father. Natalie was outraged, but found comfort in the fact that she had Willis to protect her and a newly issued restraining order.

Soon high school was over, and with it came a time of unbearable sadness for the Hawk family. Matthew, the youngest of the three children, was killed when traveling to Outer Colony worlds on a class trip. The news said a Covenant ship had attacked the school's rented commercial shuttle, but a full investigation never happened. The war had been going on since before Willis was even born, and resources were simply too scarce.

This was when Willis and Natalie seemed to reverse roles, and she was there for him as a support while he and his family grieved over the huge loss. The fact that they had both helped each other out during stressing times only strengthened their relationship.

With the death of his brother at the hands of the Covenant, Willis decided he was going to apply to the Naval Academy on Reach. Natalie confessed that she'd wanted to join the Marine Corps ever since her father had been killed in action, and so she applied as well. With their stellar grades, both Willis and Natalie quickly received their acceptance letters. Once at the Academy, their education was accelerated in order to get new officers into combat quickly. Two years after Willis and Natalie had first arrived on Reach, they were both commissioned second lieutenants in the Marine Corps.

During their time at the Academy, Willis had proposed to his girlfriend. And now, at graduation, faced with the reality of getting separated for years, they decided to get married before they were deployed. A large wedding could wait until later; for now, all they wanted was a city hall marriage with a witness and a judge.

The time to leave finally came a few weeks later. The newlyweds hadn't had a true honeymoon, but they had spent the whole time after graduation together. Like the real wedding, the real honeymoon would have to be placed on the to-do list. For the next two years and four months, Willis and Natalie were separated, experiencing combat for the first time on two different planets.

Many times during that first deployment, Willis wondered if he'd ever see his wife again.

33. Chapter 32: Dates on a Battlefield

Author's Note: So yeah, I'm continuing with my rapid-fire updating, lol. As usual, reviews are the best things ever, hope you like the chapter, and peace!

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>Chapter Thirty-Two: Dates on a Battlefield**

1845 Hours, February 18, 2552. Phase One, City of Cote D'Azur. "The Irony," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. Day Three of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV

"Covenant infantry, over by that tree! Watch for those Hunters near the lift!"

"Breaching! Breaching!"

"Sniper! Get down!"

"Set up that machine gun in the second story window and give 'em hell!"

"Building secured! Let's move, Marines!"

"Fire in the hole!"

By now, my ears were constantly ringing with the sound of gunfire and explosions. As soon as we'd entered the city, the Covies had come out in droves. There were simply Covenant troops everywhere, which, on a positive note, meant that Bravo Company didn't even need to aim to hit something.

The huge numbers of enemy soldiers, however, also made clearing out the city a long, tedious process.

"We'll do this methodically, but also quickly and efficiently," Captain Kingston had said at the briefing. "Cote D'Azur is divided into six quadrants. Bravo Company will be entering the city in Quadrant A, which is southeast relative the others. Once this sector has been swept clean, we move west to Quadrant B. From there, we'll continue to move up and to the side, until we have all the quadrants secured. Then we'll set up our perimeter around the city and keep the Covenant out. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," the other two lieutenants and I had answered.

"All right. Building by building, street by street, we'll get rid of every alien bastard lurking in Cote D'Azur. Get ready for a lot of action, Marines."

Two days later, Kingston's words were proving to be true. In over forty-eight hours, we'd managed to get only twenty-five percent of Quadrant A secured. If we continued at this pace, we'd run out of supplies well before we managed to save the city.

Of course, that was the least of my problems at the moment. Right

now, I was too busy trying to live to really think about the big picture.

"Third squad, listen up! Move to the fire escape and catch them through the emergency exit! We're pinned down!" I ordered.

I pressed my back against a ceramic planter in the corporate building's lobby, praying the hail of plasma and needles wouldn't hit me. First platoon and I had been in this hairy situation for only a couple of minutes, but with deadly projectiles filling the air around us, it felt more like two hours. We had to get the Covenant to focus their attention elsewhere, or we wouldn't even be able to return fire.

Holding my battle rifle in my gloved hands, barrel hot from days of overuse, I poked my head through the plants to get a fix on our attackers.

That turned out to be a huge mistake. I went prone immediately, my reflex almost rivaling that of a Spartan, as the green foliage above me was shredded and burned.

Exposing helmeted head to enemy fire equals bad idea, Cooper, I scolded myself.

"Hillburn! Where the fuck is my flanking unit?" I yelled into the COM above the noise of the fight.

"Moving into position, ma'am! We had snipers to take care of outside, and it took an electronics tech to get through the side door," the young lieutenant replied.

I muttered another curse, then glanced at my HUD's motion tracker. Finally, the ten yellow dots I was waiting for moved up on my squad's right side.

The cacophony of assault and battle rifles, submachine guns, and shotguns filled the room as Lieutenant Hillburn's squad opened fire.

The Covenant on the opposite side of the room shrieked with surprise, but the Elites were quick to restore order to their troops. Finding cover behind the front reception desk and other solid objects, the aliens were now pinned.

"First squad, let 'em have it!" I cried, rising from my crouched position to fire off three-round bursts. As third squad laid down suppressive fire on the enemy, I had my squad move forward slowly, going from cover to cover; the lobby of this particular company was a vast space, filled only occasionally with columns, seats, and planters.

Emerging from their cover, several Elites began to return fire in my direction. I scrambled across the marble floor and ducked behind a column, just in time to see a glowing plasma grenade sail through the air.

It landed and exploded right where I had been just an instant earlier.

Realizing how close I'd come to being stuck with an explosive, I moved around the column and squeezed the trigger of my battle rifle angrily at the enemy. Pausing to reload a moment later, I unhooked a frag grenade from my web belt and let it loose. The grenade burst as soon as it hit behind the front desk. Expensive marble, wood, and electronic furnishings flew through the lobby along with purple and blue blood from the Elites caught in the blast.

The two remaining Elites growled what sounded like orders to the frightened Jackals and Grunts. Using its shield as cover, a Jackal and a few Grunts tried to make a run for Hillburn's squad. I watched in horror as the lead Grunt primed another plasma grenade and pulled its arm back to throw.

That's when a single shot rang out through the lobby.

The Grunt's head popped in a splash of blood and brains in front of its comrades. Meanwhile, the glowing grenade fell at its feet. With third squad safely out of the blast radius, the plasma grenade exploded, taking the small group of stunned aliens with it.

"Nice work, second squad," I whispered into the COM, grinning silently inside my helmet. The snipers were hiding out just outside the building, keeping an eye on the streets and the engagement inside. Man, had they intervened at _just_ the right time.

Only a handful of aliens were now left alive inside the foyer. As third squad continued to keep the Covenant aliens pinned, first squad and I pushed forward. Another well-placed grenade and several rounds of ammo later, it was finished.

"Lobby secure, Marines. Let's regroup and head up the next few floors," I said over the platoon-wide channel. As first platoon obeyed the order, I opened another channel to Captain Kingston.

"Sir?"

"Wait one, Lieutenant," Kingston replied. I heard him breathing heavy into the mike, as though he were sprinting. A distant explosion came through the COM channel, and then, above the loud sounds of battle, a hard _thud_.

"Captain? Are you ok?" I asked, worried.

"Fine, Cooper. We're just in a bit of situation." An MA5B assault rifle opened up in a long burst, and, judging by its proximity to the mike, I recognized the weapon as Kingston's. He was currently with third platoon, working on clearing out an adjacent city block. "That's right, you lousy son of a bitch," the captain muttered as a Jackal's shriek pierced through the radio channel. "Bullets. It's what's for dinner."

"Uh, sir," I tried again.

"Go ahead, Cooper. I'm listening now."

"We've secured the lobby of the building, Captain."

"Good work, Lieutenant. Third platoon and I have just finished up

here in the caf  .

"It's a bloody shame, really. It looked like such a charming little place," Lieutenant Lewis interjected. "Now it's full of those dead buggers."

"Cooper, I want you to clear the rest of the Galaxy Stars. Do it floor by floor; you'll hear the Covies if they're in any of the rooms," Kingston said, ignoring the other lieutenant's comment.

"Yes, sir."

Then I realized what he'd said.

"Sir, did you say 'Galaxy Stars'?"

"Yes. Is there a problem?"

"No, sir, it's just  " _Is this really the same hotel I stayed in with my husband?_ I asked myself. _How did I not notice?_ Between my brain's current focus on survival and the fact that Willis and I had been too interested in each other to see much else earlier, the missed connection suddenly made more sense. _Still, I need to keep my mind sharper next time._

"The more we dawdle here, Lieutenant, the less time we have to get rid of the Covenant."

"Yes, sir, of course. Sorry," I said, returning from my musings.

"Secure the building fast. When you're done, rendezvous with third platoon at the Pearl Croissant. Got it, Cooper?"

"Yes, sir. I read you."

"That's what I like to hear. You've got ten minutes, Lieutenant. Kingston out."

When the COM went dead, I paused for a moment to let the information sink in. _I just fought a skirmish in the same hotel Willis booked for us,_ I thought. _And Kingston and Lewis blew Covies to hell in the same caf   where Willis bought us pastries._ For some reason, these facts really, really bothered me. _Light duty post, my ass_, I thought, shaking my head as I turned to face my team.

"All right, first platoon! Captain wants the building flagged a green zone in ten minutes! We've got a ton of levels, Marines! Take the rooms only if you hear or see something move, including on trackers, scanners, or vision. Let's go!"

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"Huh." Captain Kingston looked down at his watch. "Nine minutes, fifty-three seconds, Cooper. You really took my ten minutes to heart, didn't you?"

"Orders are orders, sir," I answered, trying to keep the smug look I wanted to give him off my face.

"I see." He motioned for me to follow him as third and first platoons took up positions around the hotel and café. Once we were out of earshot of the others, Kingston turned his gaze on me. I saw the dark circles under his eyes as he removed his helmet and ran a dirty hand across his brown-gray hair. _The poor guy must be beside himself,_ I thought. _Commanding one company at seventy-five percent strength against an invasion force in the very city he's supposed to liberate? It's a wonder we haven't had many casualties yet._ Sure, we were only facing part of the invasion force, as Europa Base had been under siege for days. But the heart of the city was what the Covenant were really after---their troops were specifically concentrated in Cote D'Azur.

I'd been wrong on Heath when I'd judged Captain Kingston's abilities the second time as poor and far too cautious. He'd certainly hit the head on the nail when he foresaw the last-minute attack in the desert. And here, after three days of heavy fighting in situations where we were always outnumbered, each member of Bravo Company was still alive. All of it was due to him and his skills as company commander.

I guess I should have learned to trust my first instinct.

"Cooper, I'm going to be straight with you, like I was with Graham and Lewis."

"Sir?"

"While you were clearing the hotel, we lost contact with base again." His eyes didn't waver. "There's not just static on the lines this time, Cooper. There's silence."

"You think---"

"I don't know, but the probability is high. If Europa's been overrunâ€|" Captain Kingston glanced down at his muddy boots and shook his head. After a slight pause, he looked back up at me. "Cooper, we won't go down without a fight. And we haven't lost all hope yet, either. Somehow, I know, we can at least _try_ to pull this off. But I just wanted you to know the reality of what's happening." His eyebrows darkened, and he gave me an even more serious stare. "You must also realize that we are now surrounded, yes?"

I swallowed. Swallowed hard, despite the sudden dryness in my throat. "Y-yes, sir," I replied a bit shakily.

Kingston nodded and started to walk back to the two platoons. When he had gone just a few feet, however, he turned back. The captain looked me up and down and said quietly, mostly to himself, "Shit, Cooper. You're too damn young, kid."

34. Chapter 33: Quite the Bombshell

Author's Note: Thanks so much for the reviews, and please keep 'em coming! I love to hear what you guys think of the story, so don't hesitate! Enjoy and peace, as always.

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>Chapter Thirty-Three: Quite the Bombshell**

Two Years Earlier. 1435 Hours, December 30, 2549. Delta Base Barracks, Haydensburg. "The Surprising News," Planet Ceres. William Hawk's Memories

It was only the second time Willis and Natalie had seen each other in two and a half years; when their paths had crossed briefly two months ago, it had been a serendipitous event rather than a planned meeting. At any rate, the time had gone by agonizingly slow, and both had changed after seeing all that combat. Willis still found it hard to believe that at twenty-two, he was no longer a green lieutenant and already had three campaigns under his belt.

But his changes were nothing in comparison to his wife's.

Over the course of the post-Ethan years, aided mostly by Willis but also her life in the Corps and her combat experiences, Natalie had become a different person. Gone was the frightened, damaged, and fragile young girl Willis had felt the need to protect. Natalie now had a reputation for being a brave, reliable Marine who could quickly come up with a good plan. As a leader, she kept her cool under fire and stormed into Covenant-infested areas first, her troops following behind.

The only thing that hadn't changed in either Willis or Natalie was how they felt about each other. Although it seemed like everything was different now, they were both still head-over-heels in love.

Willis Hawk remembered the day as clearly as if only hours had passed instead of years. After being called to combat duty for four straight days of dogfighting, he had returned to base haggard, tired, and dirty. Though he knew Natalie, too, went through similar periods of utter exhaustion after prolonged tours of combat, Willis had spent all that time crammed in a space vessel, where supplies ran out much faster. In fact, when he'd landed his aircraft earlier that morning, he had had only enough oxygen to last him another five hours. If that wasn't cutting it too close, Hawk had no idea what was.

The first thing he wanted was a hot shower, Willis decided, followed quickly by a hot meal and a warm bed. Or maybe he wanted food first, or perhaps sleep? No, better to get cleaned up before he saw his wife.

Willis smiled to himself. He still couldn't get over the fact that he was finally married to the woman he'd loved for so long. And before she left in two day's time, going back to Sistine to reunite with her unit after a few days of leave, they would try to come up with a tentative date for their big wedding. Of course, with a huge war going on at the moment, it was going to be nearly impossible to figure out when both of their schedules would coincide.

But those were simply details.

Heading to the male officers' barracks, Hawk showered, shaved, and dressed in a fresh uniform for the first time in almost a week. Satisfied that he had chosen the shower first, he went in search of Natalie so they could have a meal together. He was famished.

After checking several of Cooper's usual haunts, Willis finally found her going over training objectives in his quarters. When she looked up to see who had entered, Willis grinned.

"Hey, I'm back," he said.

They greeted each other with a hug and a kiss, then Cooper asked him how his combat mission had gone.

"Well, we provided air support to a group of ODSTs on the far side of the planet and managed to shoot down quite a few squadrons of Covenant aircraft. We also destroyed parts of the Covie base down there, so that should disrupt things enough for us to get the upper hand."

Natalie frowned. "Sounds like everything went according to plan. So why do you look so defeated?"

Willis sighed as he sat down next to her on the bed and dropped his gaze to the floor. Sensing something had indeed gone wrong, Natalie ran a soothing hand through his hair. He knew he could talk to her, since she'd had similar experiences with ground combat. Still, it was hard to talk about the fact that you'd just won a battle by sacrificing fellow pilots and friends.

"We lost a lot of good people, Coop. They fought hard and gained a victory for us, but...they're still fucking _dead_," Willis said quietly.

"I'm sorry, Will," she replied softly. "I know how you feel."

"Yeah, I know." Hawk gave his wife a weak smile. "That's why I'm telling you. You know what's it like to go through all this awful shit."

"It never gets any easier, does it?"

Willis nodded in agreement, then sighed again. "Well, I'll tell you more about it later. How about we get something to eat in the meantime?"

"Sure."

"I haven't had a bite to eat for four days. My stomach's been killing me and growling nonstop."

It was in the mess hall that Willis truly started to notice subtle changes in his wife's methods and attitude. This first became apparent when he saw she was playing with her hair frequently, a sign he knew to mean she was nervous. The second and perhaps most telling sign that something had changed was the fact that when he'd asked her about going to the O-Club for a beer, she'd been quick to refuse the offer. This was certainly not the Cooper he'd come to know.

They sat down at one of the tables in the far corner, even though,

considering the time, there weren't many other diners. They ate and chatted about the usual topics, mostly having to do with either the war or what was happening in their own units. Around the same time they finished eating, Willis became thoroughly annoyed by the constant hair fixing, and decided it was time to ask what was going on.

"Coop, you've been fiddling with your hair ever since we got here. You're just as stunning as ever, so I know you can't be that worried about how it looks. What's wrong?"

Expecting Natalie to smile at his compliment, he was slightly disappointed when he found that he'd only made her even more nervous.

"Will---" she started, but he cut her off.

"Coop, whatever's happened, it can't be that bad."

"I don't know that it's necessarily bad, but it's probably more than we can handle at the moment."

"What is it?" Hawk persisted.

Cooper looked around the mess hall, which seemed deserted to Hawk, but she still suggested they go outside to talk.

"Natalie, this is ridiculous. There aren't even more than a handful of people in this mess, which has a capacity of a few hundred."

"Will, this is something I discuss with you and you alone right now. Let's head back to the barracks."

Rolling his eyes and sighing, Willis followed his wife's lead, until they had once again reached his quarters.

Now well-fed and clean, Willis was getting awfully sleepy, and seeing the bed only intensified his feeling of physical exhaustion. He wasn't sure he could make it through whatever Cooper had to say before falling asleep. But, in the end, curiosity won over tiredness. He'd never seen Natalie this distraught, and it bugged him.

"Ok, now it's just you and me, Coop. What's going on?"

Natalie sat down on the bed, staring at her boots as she gathered her thoughts. Preferring to stand so as not to succumb to sleep, Willis waited patiently for whatever she had to say. When she finally looked up, he could sense her unease as he stood over her.

She took a deep breath and said, "I guess I'll just come out and say it. I'm pregnant, Will."

The nearly disabling fatigue vanished immediately. At first, Willis thought he hadn't heard right. When he thought about the subtle cues in the mess hall, however, especially Cooper's declining alcohol, it did seem to make sense.

But they were both officers in the Marine Corps during a time of war. They were young; both had turned twenty-two at the beginning of the

year. And besides, how could they possibly have a family now, when they barely even saw each other? This certainly wasn't the way they'd planned these things to happen.

All of these thoughts raced through Hawk's mind in a matter of seconds, and despite the gravity of them all, there were two thoughts strong enough to dominate the others.

I'm going to have a child with the woman I love. I'm going to be a father!

These thoughts were supposed to be expressed to Cooper, along with a wide grin. Yet when he opened his mouth to speak, all Willis ended up saying was "That'sâ€¦quite theâ€¦bombshell, Coop."

In his mind, Hawk quickly rebuked himself. _Quite the bombshell? Are you serious? You and Natalie are having a kid and that's all you can come up with?_

Meanwhile, Cooper's face fell instantly. Glancing down again, she muttered, "I knew this would be a disaster."

Willis decided he'd try again. "Natalie, I can't---" But before he could finish, his wife interrupted.

"Do this, I know," she finished incorrectly, her voice giving away just a hint of her sadness and disappointment. "We're always so careful. How did this end up happening?"

Finally able to express at least part of what he was feeling, Hawk's face broke into a huge grin. "Well, Coop, it starts out simple. When a man and a woman---"

Misinterpreting yet again, Natalie suddenly stood in anger. "You think this is a joke?"

Utterly perplexed, Willis took a step back. "Huh? No, of course not, I just---"

"I can't believe how you're reacting!"

Willis was starting to get fed up with her attitude. "How _I'm_ reacting? You won't even let me get in a word!"

"_What_?"

"I keep trying to tell you what I think, but you're making assumptions!"

"You had your chance just now, Will, but you were so busy being a huge jerk you---!"

Her words came to an abrupt end when he walked the few paces separating them and kissed her. Much to his surprise, she kissed him back, despite her confusion.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her tone much calmer.

"Whenever I tried to say anything, either my brain-to-mouth filter would shut down or you'd reach your own conclusion." He grinned

again. "So I decided on a different approach."

Cooper was glowing now, yet still slightly dubious. "But I thought you said you couldn't---"

"Think of anything that makes me more happy, excited, and nervous all at once?" Willis finished.

Natalie laughed, and the awful tension was finally lifted. She rested her head against his chest and he held her.

"How're we ever going to do this, Will?"

"We'll figure it out."

"I know a lot about weapons and tactics and explosives, but nothing about parenting."

"I'm willing to bet our parents had the same problem when we were born."

"My mother's going to go berserk when she hears about this. I told her we wouldn't have kids for a few years, until we were older." Cooper let go of him, choosing instead to sit back down on the bed. Willis continued to stand, still trying to categorize all the emotions he was feeling.

"So how far along are we, Natalie?" he asked after a while.

"About two months."

Hawk mulled this over. "That day our squadron refueled at your base to make the trip back here?"

"Must be. We don't exactly have a lot of options."

"Wow."

"Never thought that stop would be this important, huh?"

"No kidding." Willis thought about that for a moment. His squadron had almost landed at another base before finding out they couldn't make the extra hundred kilometers. Had they chosen to refuel anywhere else, Natalie and Willis wouldn't be expecting their first child.

Funny how life worked out that way sometimes.

"When did you find out?" Hawk asked.

"While you were on the mission. Since I was supposed to be heading back to my unit and probably combat in a couple days, I got the standard order to go to the medical bay for exams. You know how it goes, the endless rounds of testing and what not. For the women, there's obviously a pregnancy test included, andâ€¦" Natalie shrugged. "The doctor found I was positive. She did a sonogram and, sure enough, there it was. Our baby."

Willis's eyes widened. "Really? You can see the kid already?"

"Yeah, a little bit. The doctor said it's a fetus now."

"This isâ€¦incredible. Did she know if it was a boy or a girl yet?"

Cooper shook her head. "We won't know for another couple months, at least."

"Wow," Hawk repeated. He glanced at Natalie, who was now smiling at him, and he smiled back.

"I'm glad you didn't freak out about the whole thing," she commented.

Willis snorted. "I think you're the one who freaked out, Coop. Anywayâ€¦" He crouched down so he was level with the edge of the bed and placed a hand on his wife's stomach. Willis looked her in the eyes and said, "That tiny kid in there is mine, too, Natalie. And I love you. Why did you think I wouldn't want to do this?"

Cooper leaned down and kissed him before replying, "I don't know, Will. But you have no idea how happy I am that I'm having this child with you."

"Me, too," Hawk said, and he kissed her back.

35. Chapter 34: Sucker Punch

Author's Note: Another new chappie for you all. ;-) Hope you like it and reviews are awesome!! Peace!

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>Chapter Thirty-Four: Sucker Punch**

1416 Hours, February 20, 2552. Phase One, City of Cote D'Azur. "The Fall," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. Day Five of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV

Things were going downhill fast.

We did have a few pluses: in just two days, Bravo Company had managed to bring its dismal figure of securing twenty-five percent of Quadrant A to seventy-five percent. And, thanks to Captain Kingston's leadership skills, morale was high despite the bad news, and casualties remained low.

But Europa Base was still out of contact.

Not only that, but we'd had our first victims: two dead, both from second platoon. And now, the Marines of Bravo Company had gone eighty-five hours without sleep, and a little over thirty-one without food. For the four top officers, including me, the figures were even worse: one hundred-two hours without sleep, and thirty-nine without food.

The situation was dire, but Kingston kept us motivated and together.

He knew our chances were slim, and he'd told his officers as much. But, somehow, he was also able to give us a glimmer of hope, and through that kept our drive to come out on top strong. We fought harder and fiercer than ever, and the rate at which we'd been gaining ground recently proved it.

More than anything, we were all determined to live.

Unscrewing the cap to my canteen, I took a long drink of water to chase down the stims Doc Reynolds had given me. With Covenant crawling all over most of the city, there wasn't any place safe enough for us to get sleep yet. So for now, the officers relied on pharmaceuticals to stay awake and alert. If the Covenant continued harassing us in between clearing buildings, the whole company would soon have to use the same treatment.

"How's that working out, El-Tee?" Reynolds asked me after a few minutes. This was the first time I'd resorted to the stimulants, per Kingston's order.

"Well, I don't feel like I'm going to fall flat on my face with exhaustion anymore," I said, giving him a half-hearted grin. Until the pills took their full effect, that was all I could manage.

"Remember the side effects, ma'am," the medic warned.

"Same shit as always, right? Headache, nausea, diarrhea, vomiting?"

"You can't take these indefinitely, Lieutenant. Eventually, you'll have to sleep."

"The Covies are sure making that hard these days."

I remained seated after Petty Officer Reynolds had administered the drug. Closing my eyes only briefly, I suddenly thought of someone I hadn't thought of in years: Ethan.

I wasn't sure where the thought had come from, really. The medic hadn't listed "random thoughts of a past event you'd repressed deep in your subconscious" as one of the side effects. And yet, my mind drifted to just such a place.

Maybe it was because the situation was rapidly unraveling, and I needed to come to terms with my past before I went on to the afterlife. That was my best guess.

Whatever the case, I had devoted years following the ordeal to forgetting all about it. In fact, I hadn't thought about or talked about Ethan for close to six years. It was amazing how efficient the brain was at making horrible experiences disappear in the recesses of the mind.

But, somehow, there they were again: the months of pain, tears, and fear. Ethan's stinging hands and sharp words. The world I'd escaped from a long time ago slowly bubbling back to the surface.

"Lieutenant, are you feeling all right?" Reynolds asked.

"Huh?" I said, realizing the petty officer had spoken. I opened my eyes to find him crouched in front of me, looking at my face with concern.

"I asked how you were feeling, ma'am. You're really pale all of a sudden."

"I am? Don't worry about it, Doc, really. I'll be fine."

Reynolds didn't buy it. "If you throw up the pills, you'll have to take them again."

I laughed nervously. "Trust me, Doc. This has nothing to do with---"

I turned my head away from the medic and puked.

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"Cooper? Are you ready to tackle the next building?" Captain Kingston asked over a private COM channel a few minutes later. Against my own wishes, the medic had informed Kingston that my body hadn't taken too well to the stims. Reynolds had given me a second dose, however, and so far these were working out all right.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Take the auto manufacturing facility just across the street. Second platoon's been observing the area for the past fifteen minutes, and there seems to be quite a bit of activity in there. Can you handle it?"

"Send me in, Captain."

"Ok. I'll be with third platoon, clearing the underground parking garage a few blocks up. Second platoon will be a block away, taking care of the group of houses there. Let me know as soon as you have the facility secure, Lieutenant, and I'll give you further instructions."

"Yes, sir."

"Kingston out."

The captain closed the channel, and I opened a new one in its place. "First platoon! This is Lieutenant Cooper. We've got another assignment, a factory right out front. Third squad will infiltrate from the side door, first will come in from the back, and second will maintain position outside and snipe from the third floor of this apartment complex. Questions?"

The COM filled with empty static.

"Let's get to it, Marines!"

While I watched my platoon maneuvering as I'd ordered, my thoughts returned to Ethan. Instead of remembering the hell he'd put me

through, however, I remembered the good things that had happened once he was out of my life.

"_I promised you the day Ethan was arrested that I'd always be there for you_, " Willis had said to me nearly five years ago_. "And now, it's time I make good on that promise."_

Then he'd gone down on one knee and proposed to me.

Funny thing was, if it hadn't been for my ex-boyfriend, maybe Willis and I wouldn't be together. Or if we were, we wouldn't have the same closeness we shared now; my husband was still the only one who knew about that dark part of my past. I'd also probably be no different than I'd been back then: vulnerable and helpless. Thanks to Willis, I'd become anything but in the years following the tribulation.

"Screw you, Ethan," I whispered inside my helmet, grinning. "I'm over it."

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Walking up to the outside of the factory, my motion tracker lit up with several red dots. Gripping my battle rifle tight, I leaned against the door of the back entrance, listening and waiting. I held up my left hand, signaling first squad to standby.

I quickly and quietly slung my rifle on my shoulder and drew my silenced pistol instead.

Pfft. Pfft.

Shooting two rounds from the weapon, one for each part of the doorframe, I blew off the hinges of the entrance. I holstered my pistol and pulled back, raising my leg to kick open the doorâ€¦

And I remembered my dream.

If that's the way I depart from this life, then so be it, I thought. I didn't hesitate to finish the motion I'd begun.

The plasma and needle fire started coming my way almost immediately. I barely had time to get my battle rifle back in my hands before I had to dive to the ground. Third squad was supposed to already be in position on the other side, but it seemed something had delayed their arrival.

Lieutenant Hillburn's squad was always late for one reason or another, and one day that was going to get me killed.

Crawling between rows of large pipes and other mechanical equipment, I was able to get closer to the red dots currently unloading on me. I reached for my web belt, still lying half-prone, and tried to rip off a grenade.

My hand came back empty.

I looked down and saw a lone plasma grenade hanging on the other side of my belt. I'd used up all my grenades these past few days, and the

alien one had come my way courtesy of a dead Grunt. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to use my last explosive here or not.

Before I could make up my mind, the rest of first squad showed up around me. Now backed up by allies, I peeked over the edge of a huge black pipe and fired off precise bursts with my battle rifle. Finally, I was able to see the group of Covies exchanging fire with us—and what a big group it was.

"Dandh, Garian, come with me," I ordered, motioning with my gloved hand for them to follow me. "First squad, keep the enemy pinned until third squad arrives."

Acknowledgment lights winked green all around, and the two corporals and I began making our way through the maze of machines. While crawling a few yards away, we came upon an AI terminal. I tried to get Corporal Garian, an electronics expert, to hack it, but the terminal was busted. So much for that plan.

The two junior noncoms and I had reached a side door, located just past the AI terminal, that looked like it led to a raised section behind the attacking Covenant.

That was our in.

I ordered Garian and Dandh to take up positions behind me, and I took point as we cleared the doorway and the two small office rooms beyond. No aliens were lurking in either room. It can't be this easy, I thought to myself as I grabbed the doorknob on the opposite side.

"Bravo Company, listen up!" a voice suddenly shouted into the company-wide COM channel. Only Kingston was supposed to have the frequency to that channel, and yet the voice addressing us was female.

Graham's sudden access could only mean one thing.

"This is Lieutenant Graham! The captain is down! I repeat, Captain Kingston has been incapacitated! As executive officer of the company, I'll be taking charge of Bravo at this time. The captain is not dead, but is unable to perform his duties due to a severe wound. He has not yet been stabilized. Continue your missions for now and standby for more orders. Graham out."

For a moment, I simply stood there, motionless. Captain Kingston, our intrepid leader, had been wounded? I could hardly believe it. Looking back, I raised my faceplate and stared at my two subordinates.

"You guys hear that?" I asked, my voice revealing none of the fear I suddenly felt.

The two men nodded, clutching their weapons tightly.

I narrowed my eyes and jerked a thumb in the direction of the side door that would allow us to surprise the enemy. "Then let's go get the fuckers who did this."

****Chapter Thirty-Five: Bundle of Joy****

****Twenty Months Earlier. 1907 Hours, June 10, 2550. Fort Charles Hospital, Cristoff Highlands. "The Angel Gabriel," Planet Sistine. William Hawk's Memories****

Willis could hardly believe his good luck. With his wife almost nine months pregnant, his unit had been given a few days of leave. His only wish was that he'd continue having good fortune and actually get to see his child being born.

When Willis finally made it to Cooper's base, she was overjoyed to see him. They hugged and kissed each other, and then Willis stooped to kiss his wife's bulging stomach.

"How's the kid, Coop?" he asked her.

Natalie gave him a smirk. "Kickin' the crap out of me, but fine."

Willis laughed. "What about you? Besides the internal beating, I mean."

"My feet hurt, my back is killing me, and it's getting hard to move around. Other than that, perfect."

"Let's head to your quarters, then, so you can get a rest. Have you had dinner yet?"

"No, but I'm starving. Your kid always wants food."

Sometime during her fourth month of pregnancy, Natalie had told Willis that the doctor could finally tell they were having a boy. Although Hawk would have been happy with a daughter, he was glad their first child was going to be a son.

Once the young couple had reached Cooper's quarters, Natalie sat on the bed, propping her back against the wall. Willis settled for the wooden chair by her desk, just across from the bed, and smiled at his wife.

"What's got you so happy?" she asked him, trying to hide her creeping grin.

"I'm just glad to see that you and the baby are doing well," Hawk answered.

Natalie looked down at her stomach. "He'd better come out soon, because he's starting to get too big for his current home."

Willis stood from the hard chair and came to sit beside Cooper on the bed. She reached for his hand and placed it on her abdomen. The baby chose just that moment to give a hard kick.

"I think he's excited that his father's here," Natalie said.

"Man, if he's that strong now, imagine when he's out in the real world," Hawk replied, pleasantly surprised by his unborn son's greeting.

Natalie rested her head against Willis's shoulder, and he took her hand. The two of them---no, _three_, Hawk reminded himself---sat there in silence for a while. The whole experience was so new and overwhelming it went beyond what words could express.

Finally, though, Willis broke the silence. "So you want me to go get us some grub?" he asked quietly, trying not to ruin the tranquil moment.

"Yeah, that's a good plan."

"What can I bring you?"

"Hmm," Cooper replied, thinking. "A chocolate milkshake sounds good. And maybe some cantaloupe and pea soup."

Willis made a face. "You sure you want all that together?"

"Get me a sourdough roll, too," Natalie said, ignoring his question.

"Where am I supposed to find this stuff?"

"Check out the PX. There's an ice cream shop in town, too, and it's nearby."

Sighing, Willis got off the bed and stood, mumbling, "Ok."

"Hey, I've had to carry our kid for nine months, and you're complaining because you have to get _food_?" Natalie said behind him, her voice containing a hint of anger.

Here it comes, Willis thought. When he'd announced his wife's pregnancy to some of the members of his squadron, the men who'd had children before had warned him of crazy hormones. And, seeing as he hadn't been in Natalie's presence since the day he'd found out, this was his first taste of what could be a very interesting few days.

"I'm not complaining, Coop," Willis said calmly, turning around to face her. "It's just that it might take me a while to get back with everything."

Cooper huffed and crossed her arms over her belly. "Just go, Will."

Though beginning to get frustrated, Hawk stopped himself from uttering a smart-ass remark. _It's not her fault_, he told himself. _This is only temporary and she'll go back to normal soon._ Still, he found it hard to hold his tongue.

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When he finally returned some time later, Willis braced himself for a verbal confrontation; he'd been out for over an hour in an attempt to find all she'd requested. The only good thing was that he'd remembered to get the milkshake last, so that it wasn't all a liquidity

mess by the time Cooper received it.

Instead of the rebuke he'd expected, however, Hawk found that his wife was grateful for tracking everything down for her. To say that he was confused at the moment would have been an understatement.

"You're the best husband ever, you know that?" Natalie said to him as she happily ate her bizarre dinner.

Willis grinned, thinking of her earlier assessment of him before he'd left. "Thanks. I try," he replied, wolfing down his own food. All that running around had made him hungry, as well.

With the meal over a while later, Willis and Natalie again sat propped-up on the bed together. Hawk explained what had been going on for him and his squadron since Cooper's departure, and Natalie told him of her predicament--she longed to return to battle with her unit. She confessed that although she was ecstatic about the baby, she felt as though she were letting her unit down by not being in the thick of it with them.

"Don't worry about it, Coop. I'm sure they understand," Willis reassured her.

"I know. They said they were happy for me, but it's still not fair. They're off fighting on Lacino right now, and I should be a part of it."

"But your CO said you'd join them once the baby is born, right?"

"Yeah, but then I'd want to be with our kid." She ran a hand through her auburn hair and sighed. "I wish there was some way for me to be with my Marines and my son." She was about to add more when she suddenly got a look of discomfort on her face.

Alarmed, Willis quickly sat up straighter. "Natalie? What's wrong? Are you ok?"

"Willis!"

"What?"

"I think my water just broke."

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They arrived at the base hospital, which was fortunately close by, in twenty minutes. Willis noted that Natalie seemed strangely calm, yet he could feel his own heart thumping hard against his chest. Was it possible for a fit young man of twenty-three to die of a heart attack at a time like this? Hawk decided there was a strong chance that he would qualify.

"State your name and rank," the emergency room tech said when Willis approached the front desk.

"Lieutenant William Hawk," he answered in a rush.

"What's the problem?"

"My wife's going into labor!"

"What's her name?"

"Lieutenant Natalie Cooper."

"How far apart are the contractions?"

Willis blanked. He looked back at Cooper, sitting on a chair in the waiting area. "Natalie?"

"I don't know. Like every ten minutes," she answered.

"Ok. We'll get a room prepped. Go ahead and have a seat, Mr. Hawk."

Sit down? Willis thought. _How am I supposed to sit down and wait when Natalie's going to give birth soon!_ Somehow, though, he managed the feat and sat beside his wife.

"Natalie? How're you doing?" he asked, putting his arm around her shoulders.

"Ok, for now. It only hurts when the contractions come."

"When did you start getting them?"

"While you were gone."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Hawk inquired, surprised.

"They were farther apart, and I wasn't sure yet. I didn't want to freak you out."

Newsflash, Coop! Hawk wanted to say. _I _am_ freaking out!_ But he knew he had to remain calm, at least on the outside, for Cooper's sake. He took a deep breath and gave her shoulder a small squeeze.

"You'll be all right, Natalie. I'm here with you."

Willis wasn't sure if he believed his own words, but the fact that the tech was preparing a room for them gave him comfort.

Minutes ticked by, however, with no indication as to what had happened to said room. Willis wondered if maybe he'd missed the receptionist calling their name.

Walking up to the front desk again, he asked the tech, "Have you gotten to the names Hawk and Cooper yet?"

The tech gave Willis an annoyed glance, then skimmed through a list on his datapad. "Nope. You guys are third in line, though. That's pretty good, considering you just came in."

"Just came in?" Willis repeated, flabbergasted. "We've been here a

long time! My wife's contractions are getting closer together!"

"Have a seat, Mr. Hawk. Your name will be announced shortly."

Willis grew increasingly impatient as time continued to crawl, and Natalie was starting to sweat from the effort of keeping the pain to herself.

"Hawk! Cooper!" the receptionist finally called.

"Come on, Coop," Willis said, helping her to her feet. "It's our turn."

"It'd better be," Natalie managed to say through gritted teeth.

Another tech suddenly approached, bringing a wheelchair for Cooper to sit in. At first reluctant to accept the help, Natalie quickly complied when she had another contraction.

While Cooper was placed in a room, the tech gave Willis a pair of scrubs to put on and had him wash his hands thoroughly. Finally, they allowed him back in.

"Ok, Cooper. Take it easy. The father's come back," the doctor said, inviting Willis to stand beside his wife. As soon as he reached the side of the hospital bed, Hawk offered his hand to Natalie. She took it without looking at him; her concentration was fierce.

"Yup, we're getting closer," the doctor said. "Cooper? You sure you don't want that epidural? Last chance."

Natalie nodded. "I'm going natural, Doc."

In the next few minutes, Natalie began getting stronger and more frequent contractions. At first she only seemed to growl when the pain hit, but as the moment drew near, she started to cry out.

"Here we go," the doctor said. "The baby's head is crowning."

"Hang in there, Coop," Willis said to his wife, stroking her hair with his free hand. Natalie was squeezing his other hand hard, and it was starting to get numb. Still, he tried his best to soothe her and muttered various assurances in her ear.

"All right, you two. The head is out!" the doctor announced.

"Hear that, Coop? You're almost done, Natalie. Doing great," Hawk said to her, barely able to contain his growing excitement.

"Just a few more good pushes," the doctor said.

Natalie squeezed Willis's hand so hard that he swore he was going to hear it crack any second. She yelled out in pain, pushing with all her might. Hawk briefly wondered if she regretted not using any pain medication.

"All right! One last push should do it," the doctor exclaimed.

Cooper gave that final strong push, and there was a sudden flurry of activity as Willis and Natalie's child was born.

A piercing scream echoed through the room as the baby began to cry.

"It's a boy," the doctor said, cutting the umbilical cord deftly and handing the infant to a nurse. As the baby was getting suctioned, Willis put a soothing hand on his wife's forehead. Natalie was sweating and weak from the ordeal, but she still smiled up at him.

"You did great, Coop. I'm proud of you," Willis said, smiling in return. Though it appeared that Cooper wanted to reply, the effort was too much. She settled for nodding in thanks at him.

With the infant finally cleaned up, measured, and weighed, the doctor returned to hand the baby, wrapped in a blue blanket, to his mother.

"Congratulations, you two," the doctor said, smiling. "You are now the parents of a health baby boy. I'll give you a moment to get acquainted, and I'll be back to find out what you want to name this little guy."

"Thanks, Doc," Willis replied.

"Don't mention it."

Willis then turned his gaze to his wife and newborn son.

"He's small," Natalie whispered.

"Yeah. Looks kind of fragile," Willis added, leaning his face in close.

"I can't believe it, Will. This is our baby. Our little son."

"He's amazing," Hawk said, staring at his child.

"And he's so beautiful," Natalie commented. She looked up at Willis and smiled.

Willis smiled back and said, "We made one cute kid, Coop."

Despite her fatigue, Natalie managed a small laugh. "You're right." She paused, then added, "I'm really glad you're here, Willis."

"Yeah, me, too." After a moment, Willis looked at her and said quietly, "I love you, Natalie."

"I love you, too, Will," she replied. They kissed, then resumed staring down at their son.

A few minutes later, the doctor who'd delivered the baby came back into the room.

"Well? Have you decided on a name?"

Willis looked at Natalie, and she nodded. They'd chosen the name months earlier, a short time after they'd found out they were having a boy.

"Gabriel Matthew," Willis answered.

The doctor thought a moment, entering the name into his datapad. "Gabriel Matthew Hawk, huh? That's a good name."

37. Chapter 36: Survival Instincts

Author's Note: As usual, hope you enjoy, please review, and peace!

P.S. By the way, M., dads are allowed to be there for childbirth. My dad was there when I was born, and pretty much any baby show on TLC can tell you that much. ;-)

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>Chapter Thirty-Six: Survival Instincts**

0350 Hours, February 25, 2552. Phase One, City of Cote D'Azur. "The Asthma Attack," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. Day Ten of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV

Five more days went by like this.

None of the officers let their subordinates see their faces anymore---everyone was always hiding behind a tinted faceplate. We'd had two briefings since Captain Kingston was wounded, however, and it was at these meetings that the platoon leaders removed their helmets. That was when you could figure out the real feelings lurking deep in the officers' eyes.

I was no different. I could easily control my voice in front of my platoon, and offer words of encouragement and hope to my Marines. We hadn't been doing so bad, really, and we'd even finished up with Quadrant A. But losing Captain Kingston's leadership was a blow to Bravo Company, one we really didn't need. Lieutenant Graham was competent enough and even quite skilled; she just wasn't the captain we'd followed into battle without question.

And then there was the part during the first briefing where she'd said I would be her executive officer.

Leaning against a table with my arms folded across my chest, I'd given her a questioning look immediately. "What?"

"You'll be my XO, Cooper," Lieutenant Graham had repeated, turning her attention on me.

When I didn't reply, Lieutenant Lewis had glanced my way.

"I know what you're thinking, Natalie. But Graham here did everything by the book."

I'd looked at Lewis, surprised. "You're older than me though, Dean. Shouldn't you be XO?"

"He was commissioned a month after you, kid. I checked his CSV and then yours. Senior lieutenant gets the job."

I'd nodded slowly. Couldn't argue with that. "What do you want me to do, El-Tee?"

"Same thing I did when Kingston was in charge." She grinned. "Write up most of my papers and assure me that my orders are perfect for the mission."

A small smile had formed on my face. "You got it, Graham."

Four days had passed after that initial briefing, and we were now a third of the way through with Quadrant B. So what was the real reason why the three top officers were secretly worried?

Every minute we fought the Covenant was another minute the wounded captain spent in a dark, dank basement.

Lewis had told Graham and I that when Captain Kingston had gone to clear out the parking garage with third platoon, everything was going well. Covies were cleared out of the roof and street levels of the structure, and all that remained was the underground story. As soon as the platoon marched cautiously down the ramp, however, camouflaged Brutes had opened fire with a variety of weapons. A well-placed Brute shot round had exploded right against the wall near Kingston; the explosion knocked the captain backwards.

It took a moment for third platoon's medic to realize a pool of blood was forming beneath Kingston's helmet.

The captain had eventually been stabilized, but he was now in need of constant monitoring. And if we were really the only soldiers left on the planet, the medevac he desperately needed was obviously out of the question. The only thing Graham, Lewis, and I could do now was play down the captain's true condition and try to keep morale up.

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"Lieutenant?"

Strange. Where's that distant sound coming from?_ I wondered, shifting a bit in my sleep. Must be dreaming!_

"Lieutenant Cooper, ma'am?"

Starting to become slightly more aware, I convinced myself that the voice was really just part of my subconscious oblivion. That is, until the "dream voice" prodded me in the ribs. I inhaled sharply, the action jerking the rest of my body awake, and opened one eye.

"What the---?" I cried. Or, at least, I intended to shout the exclamation. I was still half-asleep, and so the words came out in a

low mumble.

"Sorry to wake you, Lieutenant, but you told me not to let you sleep more than three hours."

I opened both eyes this time, and forced myself to sit up. Three hours of sleep every few days wasn't my idea of a good time. "Thank you, Corporal Garian," I said, picking up my rifle, which I'd used as a pillow, and standing. I grabbed my helmet from a nearby shelf and gripped it with both hands.

"You're welcome, Lieutenant," Garian replied.

I lifted my helmet and held it on my head. Before pulling it down over my face, I looked at my aide. "You caught me just in time, Gary. I was about to go into a coma."

I watched through my visor as the corporal laughed. Sealing the helmet in place and strapping on my gloves, I looked around the library we'd cleared out a few hours ago. This had become first platoon's temporary rest area, but now it was time to hit the road again.

I would say it's been fun and that I'll miss this place, but then I'd just be lying, I thought to myself.

"Rise and shine, first platoon. Get your gear together and be ready to move out in five," I said over the platoon-wide channel.

I heard a few isolated groans and mutterings come over the radio as my Marines woke up_. If they only knew how much I hate doing this to them_, I thought. _What we all need is a regiment of reinforcements and a month of shore leave._

"Cooper, this is Graham."

"What's up?" I replied.

"Third platoon is coming back from clearing out a few surrounding blocks, so they're going to need the library for some rest. Second platoon and I will continue to maintain a perimeter, and I need first platoon rotated out."

"Say the word, El-Tee."

"A restaurant, bordering the Lumiar River. I'm pretty sure it's La Rose Something-or-other, and---"

"Jesus, Graham. You don't mean La Rosa Bianca, do you?" I asked, incredulous.

"That's the one." There was a pause. "Should I ask how you know?"

"My husband took me out to dinner there when he visited," I answered, almost in a state of shock. I wasn't sure why I was surprised that I had to keep clearing out familiar places; after all, the city hadn't changed since Willis had been here. I guess it was just weird going into combat in the same places you'd spent your leisure time.

"That's a helluva coincidence, Cooper. But I still need those Covies gone."

"Don't worry, Graham. I'm already on it."

"Good. Graham out."

Only a few minutes passed before first platoon was ready to move out, and we did so quietly. Creeping through the streets in the early morning darkness, I ordered my platoon to activate their night vision if they hadn't done so already.

When we came within several yards of La Rosa Bianca, I had my platoon halt behind me. I told second squad, the snipers, to maintain position here; the mix of buildings and trees would keep them from being seen. As with the other places we'd cleared, I had first and third squads split to take the building from opposite sides. So far, these tactics had been working to our advantage.

I took a deep breath, wondering for just a fraction of a second if it would be my last. Then, I unhooked my final plasma grenade and used it to blow open the door.

Surprised alien shrieks came through my helmet's audio pick-up, and I unconsciously placed a hand to my ears. The skirmish began instantly, though I doubted anyone could see what he or she was shooting at. I had to put a stop to this chaos, or first and third squads might end up shooting each other.

Friendly fire was one of the most awful misnomers in the English language.

"First squad, check your fire! Hillburn, make sure third knows where they're aiming before they let loose!" I ordered over the COM channel.

"Friend-or-foe tags activated on our HUDs, Lieutenant," the officer radioed back. "We see you, ma'am, and we won't fire in your direction."

"Good. Take those bastards out!"

Out in the dining area, there were only Grunts and Jackals. Marines with mid-range weapons were quickly causing the Jackals' shields to flare red, making them easy prey for those with assault rifles. The Grunts were taken care of using a combination of head snipes and shredder rounds from submachine guns. By the time we were done in the dining hall, the place looked more like a butcher shop than a five-star restaurant.

Trying not to step on any dead alien bodies and wincing when there was a crunch under my boots, I led my Marines to the back rooms. A quick glance showed that only a kitchen and a large freezer room lay beyond. The situation looked easy enough, so I pushed through the swinging double-doors without hesitating.

I immediately realized what a serious error I'd committed when I bumped right into an Elite.

I inhaled sharply and tried desperately to move back, but the alien was fast. It grabbed my throat in a flash of motion, and lifted me off my feet with ease.

First and third squads entered through the door one by one, but there wasn't enough room for all; a hidden group of several Elites emerged from the freezer storage room and pinned down my Marines. While all this was going on, I could feel myself getting blue in the face from lack of oxygen.

The alien shoved me against the wall so hard that I saw stars for a good minute. And, of course, the action did little to ease the lingering pain in my ribs and back. The Elite ripped off my helmet just in time to catch the latter part of my pained grunt.

"Get to the lieutenant now!" I heard Hillburn yell from somewhere. The voice sounded distant, though she must have been near for me to hear her without a helmet.

Placing a hand on the Elite's massive fist to try to get air, I moved my other hand to where my combat knife was hidden. The Elite seemed oblivious, as he was busy staring into my eyes.

"You fear death, do you not, human?" he asked.

"Who doesn't?" I croaked, finally grabbing hold of one of my knives. "But I sure as hell won't die here." I used my last reserves of energy to stab the alien in the neck with all my might. The Elite roared, but it came out more like a gurgling because of the blood pulsing out of its throat; I'd managed to hit its carotid artery.

The alien fell, grasping its throat helplessly and convulsing on the floor. He released his hold on me, and I was finally able to take in a ragged breath. Oxygen was just about the best damn thing at times like this.

Realizing I was in the middle of a firefight at the moment, I picked up my helmet and put it back in place. Unfortunately, I was just in time to hear Lieutenant Hillburn's panicked voice come through the COM.

"Watch out, El-Tee!" she cried.

A Brute who'd remained in the shadows earlier suddenly appeared on the far side of the room. Apparently, it had chosen to focus on first squad and I; the round it launched from its Brute shot was aimed right at us.

I tried to get out of the way, but the effort was too much for my overtaxed body. The round thankfully exploded well above my head just as I went prone, but I still blacked out for an instant.

When I came to about thirty seconds later, I woke to find that everything was in a smoky slow motion. I could see a Marine that seemed to be shouting orders---Hillburn?---and two dark-clad figures running towards me.

My vision was so blurry I got dizzy just by moving my arms. Finally, though, I was able to see the shotgun in my hands---it was now in two

pieces. I looked down at the armor plating on my arms and saw that they were all scorched and scratched.

The two uniformed Marines I'd seen seconds earlier reached me, and I barely felt them grab my arms and drag me out of the restaurant.

Wait, I wanted to protest. _My men are still fighting in there._
I'm supposed to be with them. For some reason I couldn't understand, my words failed to come out in speech.

The two Marines finally set me down in the grass, and I found myself staring up at a starry night sky between the treetops. _Am I dying?_
_I wondered. _God, please don't let me die here. I want to see Gabe and Will, just one last timeâ€|_

I suddenly realized my helmet had been removed. One of the Marines lifted his faceplate, and he looked like he was talking to me. _Corporal Garian, right? Yeah, I recognize those emerald eyes_. If it hadn't been for that damn ringing in my ears, maybe I would've been able to hear him.

"Lieutenant? Lieutenant Cooper?"

I began to hear my aide's voice, but it sounded like it was far away. Definitely not the volume his voice should have been when he was right in front of my face. That stupid, incessant ringing was driving me crazyâ€|

"I'll go get Doc Reynolds," a second Marine said. Slowly, I recognized the voice as Corporal Simmons.

"N-no," I said, finally able to talk. "I-I think I'm ok. No need to bother Doc."

The two corporals exchanged looks, and then Garian turned back to me.

"Are you sure about that, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"All due respect, ma'am, but you nearly took a grenade to the head," Simmons added.

"My helmet protected me from most of the blast. Anyway, I think I can finally hear nowâ€|"

"Simmons, get Doc," a third voice ordered. "The restaurant's clear, and there's only one other casualty."

"Who? Who's hit, Hillburn?" I questioned, worried.

"Dandh," the second lieutenant answered, helping me sit up.

"He's not---?" I started to ask, but I found I was unable to finish the sentence.

"Thankfully, no," Second Lieutenant Hillburn said. "He just took a piece of that Brute shot round in the arm. He'll be fine."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good. I'd better report to

Graham right away."

"No, ma'am. What you'd better do is stay put, Lieutenant," Reynolds said as he approached.

"Aw, come on, Doc. I don't need a fucking show, all right? I got hit, I blacked out, I got over it. Ok?"

The medic made a face. "You blacked out?"

I shrugged. "It was only for a few seconds." I looked up at him angrily. "And I'm not going to sit here and be a good little patient while Covenant take over the city." With my vision back to normal and the ringing subsiding, I got to my feet. The ground started spinning fast, but Petty Officer Reynolds was at my side before I could fall.

"I really think it would be best if you took it easy, Lieutenant," the medic said.

"We don't have time, Doc, and you know it," I retorted, looking him in the eyes. He stared back, determined not to back down. In the end, however, my rank overruled his medical expertise.

He sighed. "All right, El-Tee. You win. Just be sure you can at least stand straight before you make your case next time."

I shot him a glare as I shook off his stabilizing arms. Once again, he was walking a fine line between exercising his medical authority and sounding insubordinate. And this time, he was doing it in the presence of others.

"I appreciate the concern, Doc, but you'd better start learning when to follow orders," I said as I walked past him, making sure the others heard.

38. Chapter 37: Messing With My Head

****Chapter Thirty-Seven: Messing With My Head****

****2212 Hours, February 27, 2552. Phase One, City of Cote D'Azur. "The Emptiness," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. Day Twelve of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV****

The rain started out as light sprinkle in the early afternoon; as the day progressed, however, it grew heavier and heavier. By 2200 hours, the clouds were unleashing a full-fledged downpour on the devastated city of Cote D'Azur.

UNSC Marine battledress uniforms were equipped with a number of nifty little systems, and the waterproof component was certainly helpful. Still, after hours of being pounded by cold rain, even the waterproof seals started to fail. I could feel my soggy clothes and wet boots clinging to my body, and it was making me miserable. Damn perimeter watch.

"When are we gettin' out of this hellhole, El-Tee?" Corporal Dandh asked as he walked up to me. He was holding his submachine gun in his left hand, and I could see the weapon dripping with rainwater. _If

our guns start jamming up, then we're going to be even more screwed than we already are_, I thought to myself.

"As soon as we save the planet, Corporal," I answered casually. I lifted my faceplate and offered him a small smirk.

The junior noncom snorted. "Of course, ma'am. I forgot," he said, his tone making it clear that he was smiling behind his visor.

"We'll get through this, Dandh, just like we did on Heath," I told him, serious now. "Keep your weapon locked and loaded and a good head on your shoulders. That'll do the trick."

The corporal's faceplate turned in my direction and lingered for a moment. Finally, the Marine nodded slowly and faced away. "All right. I trust you, Lieutenant."

"I know, and I'm thankful for that." My attention drifted back to the gun in the corporal's left hand, and I gestured toward his wound. "How's the arm?"

Corporal Dandh glanced down at his right forearm, which was wrapped up in a bandage. "I'll live, El-Tee," he replied quietly. "As long as I leave it be, it doesn't hurt so much."

A silence followed. I widened my stance and folded my arms across my chest.

"You know, when I first met you, I wasn't so convinced you'd turn out to be the Marine you are now," I said. "Actually, you damn well pissed me off, Dandh."

He looked back at me, and I smirked at him again.

Finally raising his own faceplate, the corporal gave me a sheepish grin. "I guess I kind of brought that on myself, huh?" He sobered, then continued in a low voice, "I don't know if I should be telling you this, ma'am, but here goes. Before you showed up, we had this awful lieutenant. No one could stand him. He was a bit of an ass, and he couldn't figure out a tactical situation if his life depended on it---which, more often than not, it did. He never took the time to get to know his Marines, and we were always afraid we'd end up dead the next time he screwed up.

"They were in the process of transferring him to a desk job when he was killed in the Reatan Desert, back on Heath," Dandh said. Staring down at his wet boots, he added, "The bastard managed to take part of first platoon with him. That's why we ended up understrength when you arrived, ma'am."

Corporal Dandh shook his head. "I was pretty bitter about the whole thing, and that's when you showed up. I thought you'd be just like him, Lieutenant, and it freaked me out."

"I get you, Corporal," I said, thinking of my former captain from when I was on Walter's Peak. Dandh's lieutenant sounded identical to him.

The corporal suddenly looked up at me. "Before more shit hits the fan, El-Tee, I want you to know that you're his complete opposite. I

realized that in your first days with us on Heath, when you actually went around the foxholes and spoke to everyone. It meant a lot to the platoon and it meant a lot to me. Knowing your officers care about your welfare is comforting, gives you hope."

Without consciously thinking about it, I found myself smiling. Dandh noticed my expression and blushed.

"Sorry, ma'am. I wasn't trying to be all sentimental or anything," he said in a rush.

"It's fine, Dandh. I understand," I replied. "I appreciate what you said, and I hope you realize how much you've changed yourself since then."

The noncom shrugged. "Guess you're just a good fit, El-Tee." Corporal Dandh brought his visor back down then, and I nodded to let him return to his post. Meanwhile, the rain continued pouring down hard.

For some reason, though, this fact didn't bother me as much as it had earlier.

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Two boring hours of guarding the perimeter passed before Lieutenant Graham radioed me.

"Cooper, this is Graham. Time to get the company on the move again."

"Where do you want First, El-Tee?" I asked, hefting my battle rifle and standing. I'd been sitting under a narrow strip of roof, trying any way I could to stay dry. Unfortunately, the roof was so narrow that rain still fell on my combat boots when I had pulled my knees close to my chest.

"We're going to take the river, kid."

"Want to be more specific? The Lumiar's huge."

"A few klicks north of that restaurant, for your platoon. Third will be directly behind you as a reserve force, and second will be on your right flank. The river itself will be on the company's left, so that should box the Covies in."

I nodded. "Sounds like a good plan, Lieutenant."

The other officer laughed. "See? You're learning this XO thing pretty quick."

I grinned briefly, then turned serious again. "Uh, Graham?"

"What's on your mind, kid?"

"Is Kingston doing ok? I haven't been able to see him since yesterday."

"Third's medic is keeping watch on him, Cooper. The captain's

condition has been steady so far, but he still needs a hospital. Doc says he might wake up soon, though."

"I hope he makes it," I said quietly.

"You and me both, kid. All right, get ready. We move out in five minutes."

"Understood."

I quickly switched channels and addressed my platoon this time. "Word's come down from the acting company commander, first platoon," I said. "The broad Lumiar River's going to be ours. Am I right, Marines?"

"Oorah!" a chorus of voices answered over the COM channel.

"That's what I thought. Meet me at the rendezvous point in five. Cooper out."

As I waited for my Marines to arrive at my position, I checked my weapons. I'd left my broken shotgun at La Rosa Bianca, and one of my knives was probably still stuck in that Elite's neck. That left me with my battle rifle, my silenced pistol, and one combat knife. It wasn't a great inventory, but it was better than what some of the other Marines had.

Looking down at my web belt, I opened up a couple of cartridge pouches; I found them empty. I shoved my hands in my cargo pockets and discovered that I only had two clips of ammo left for my battle rifle. _Crap_, I thought. _That'll only last me the first few minutes_.

I radioed Lieutenant Graham, and she agreed to bring me a few clips from our limited inventory. We were currently storing our surplus food, ammo, water, and medical supplies in the basement where Captain Kingston was being treated. Slung my battle rifle over one shoulder, I checked my watch. I still had two minutes.

Over the years I'd learned to always make the most of my time, and so I ducked back underneath the roof. Out of the rain for the moment, I pressed a button and undid the seal on my helmet. I took it off and flipped it so I could see inside. Tucked deep into my helmet's padding, I found what I was looking for: the two photos I always carried with me.

I glanced briefly at the first, a picture of Willis and I goofing off on shore leave. Even though it had been less than a month since I'd seen my husband, I already missed him a lot. _I hope he knows we're still alive over here_, I thought, replacing the photo.

The second was of little Gabe, and my throat tightened when I looked at my son.

It was hard to describe how awful it felt to be separated from him. Not a day went by that I didn't think of Gabriel, and each time I did I felt like my heart was being ripped out of my chest. I loved him more than a dictionary of words could ever express and missed him just as terribly. I was his mother; first and foremost, I knew I had a duty to him and him alone. That meant I should be there for him: to

love him, teach him, nurture him, and raise him. Instead, because of the damn Covenant, I was far away on another planet. I knew that in reality, I was doing the right thing. By fighting the Covenant to stop them from exterminating the human race, I was protecting my son. But some days, even that was hard to accept.

Sorry, Gabe. I'll try to get home, but the situation's not looking too good right now, son.

There was still no contact with Europa Base, and so we feared Bravo Company alone was left alive on Sigma Octanus IV. It was almost a silent understanding between the officers: if that was true, we were up shit's creek. Bravo was simply buying itself a few more days of life, and nothing more.

I kissed the picture of my son before putting it back inside my helmet. _If there's one thing that keeps me going and gives me hope no matter what_, I thought as I fixed my helmet on my head once more, _it's you_,
Gabe._

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The firefight along bank of the Lumiar River didn't take long to become a small battle.

Covenant infantry and Ghosts seemed to be crawling out of every rotting tree stump and hole in the dirt. Now that we were up against the alien vehicles, I was glad I'd had my platoon save their last few rockets.

"Heavy weapons, take care of those Ghosts!" I yelled over the COM as I emptied my clip into a Brute. The huge beast, bleeding from multiple holes in its chest, fell just feet from where I stood. If I'd been just a fraction too slow when I'd seen him charging me, I'd probably be dead.

Boiling lances of plasma tore through the trees in the early morning forest. I ducked behind a downed redwood and watched as trees and brush lit on fire.

When I looked at the smoldering forest and heard the sounds of battle all around me, I had to shut my eyes tight. I noticed that my pulse and breathing were rapidly increasing. Suddenly, I felt like I was suffocating inside my helmet.

I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't fucking breathe! I thought in a panic.

"Lieutenant Cooper? Are you all right?" Doc Reynolds's voice came through the COM.

The longer I kept my eyes closed, the more I remembered the forest battle on Heath. _Everything on fire, explosions everywhere, the smell of burning flesh_

"Lieutenant!" The medic's voice was more urgent this time, but I couldn't respond.

_Captain Garcia's head was a large black hole, scored badly from plasma. Lieutenant Dowd's corpse was missing its legs, courtesy of a Wraith tank blast. A whole group of Marines from another platoon were running through the forest, fully engulfed in flames. The Covenant stood on the far side, no longer firing their weapons but watching the humans roast to death... _

Doc Reynolds was suddenly crouched in front of me. He removed my helmet with practiced ease, and rain began pelting my face. "Lieutenant Cooper? Are you hit?" he asked.

Black smoke enveloped the forest as I tried desperately to keep the Covenant at bay. We were finally succeeding, but then the unexpected attack occurred. The bastards unleashed their hidden reserve force, coming at us from behind. I let out a piercing scream as my back suddenly burned with a searing, white-hot pain—|

A violent shake finally brought me back to the present.

"Ma'am, are you with me?" Petty Officer Reynolds asked, searching my face with worry.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm here, Doc," I said, getting my breathing under control.

"I heard you start to hyperventilate. I thought you'd been wounded, El-Tee."

"No, no, don't worry. I'm ok."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Don't waste your time here, Doc. There might be someone who needs you."

The medic gave me a look; I knew he didn't buy my story. But, finally, he nodded. "Yes, ma'am," he replied.

As soon as he had left, I put my helmet back on and took a deep breath. _Pull it together, Cooper_, I thought as I reloaded my battle rifle. I couldn't let the past get in the way of the fight I was trying to win now.

Holding my gun to bear, I saw that first platoon's rocket team had taken out the Ghosts; the Covenant vehicles lay in various positions and states of damage. I was glad we didn't have to deal with those things anymore.

But now, we had bigger fish to fry.

As I moved up from the redwood to another cover, I loosed a hail of battle rifle fire on Grunts and Jackals hiding between the trees. Meanwhile, the rest of first platoon followed my lead as I continued my forward advance.

"First platoon, focus your fire on the Brutes and Elites before the others. Once they're gone, take care of the stragglers," I said over the platoon channel.

As first platoon acknowledged my order, I crouched beside the bodies

of the aliens I'd just killed. After searching them for any useful gear, I found myself happily in possession of two plasma grenades. Who said things never go right?

The inquiry was a rhetorical one, but it got answered anyway: looking up in the distance, I saw two massive aliens glowing with green light.

"First platoon, take cover!" I yelled, going prone instantly.

The two Hunters chose to let their fuel rod cannon rounds loose just seconds later. I held onto my helmet as the rounds hit trees on either side of me, shaking the ground. When I lifted my head some moments later, I saw that a wall of flames now surrounded me.

Despite the rain, which kept coming down in sheets, the fires weren't sputtering or dying out yet. So, I had two choices: burn to death, or take my chances running through the flames.

Screw this, I thought. With all the rainwater on my uniform, not to mention its own flame-retardant fabric, I figured I should be able to come out unscathed.

I found the spot with the least amount of red-orange flames and jumped out.

"Let's take those Hunters down, Marines!" I cried over the COM channel, adrenaline pulsing through my body. I'd managed to escape unwanted cremation, and boy, did it feel good to be alive.

Two more huge green plasma rounds reverberated through the forest, but first platoon and I advanced until we were within weapons range. The fun duck-and-shoot dance with the Hunters lasted only long enough for the snipers to hit the hulking creatures in the back.

Surveying the area and finding it clear, I breathed a sigh of relief. "Good work, first platoon. Area secure," I relayed over the platoon-wide COM channel. The Marines' green lights winked twice on my HUD, silent cheers that our part of the fight was finally over.

Grinning inside my helmet, I quickly radioed the acting company commander.

"Lieutenant Graham, first platoon has secured the west side of the Lumiar," I said.

"Ma'am, this is Second Lieutenant Frederick," a male voice on the other end replied. "I'm commanding second platoon now, ma'am. Lieutenant Graham is dead."

39. Chapter 38: Influential Conversation

Author's Note: Thanks for the reviews, they're really awesome!! I wouldn't have a story if I didn't have loyal readers, so hats off to all of you. ;-) Reviews make my day, so please keep 'em coming! Hope you continue to enjoy the story and peace!

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>Chapter Thirty-Eight: Influential Conversation**

1724 Hours, February 27, 2552. UNSC Roosevelt Air Base, Skagen, Denmark. "The Struggle," Planet Earth. Day Twelve of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV

Lieutenant Willis Hawk couldn't fathom how he'd made it nearly two weeks knowing she was gone.

He had replayed key parts of their lives together in his head, wondering what he could've done or said differently. She was only twenty-four years old; surely, he must have done something wrong if she'd been taken from him so young.

As much as Hawk wanted to see his son in the days following the news, he feared the meeting. He wasn't sure how he himself would react, let alone his small child. And besides, what could you say to a toddler who had lost a mother he'd probably never remember?

That was probably what tore at Willis the most. When Gabriel grew older, he wouldn't remember the mother who, despite being far, loved him so much. He wouldn't be able to experience or have the memories of spending time with Natalie. The whole situation just wasn't fair.

Dreams of their life after the war were now shattered: settling down someplace quiet with their son, having more children, using their combined science and mathematics degrees to start a business building colony ships. Everything had happened so damn fast, and Willis just couldn't stand it. One life, taken away in an instant, had suddenly changed his entire world.

"Willis?"

Hawk snapped out of his despair and looked up. He saw Lieutenant Brandon Heat, his best friend, standing in front of him.

"How long have you been here?" Willis asked, his voice scratchy and low.

"Just walked in. Had to call your name a few times before you answered, though," Brandon replied. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked his buddy in the eyes. "I'm going to say this once more, Willis. Intense scrutiny of your life isn't going to help you, and it's not going to bring her back. You can drive yourself crazy all you want, but then it'll only be your son that suffers."

The words seemed to strike a chord in Willis. He ran his hands over his face and slowly nodded. "I know, Brandon. You're right." As much as he wanted to let go and give in to the pain, _just fucking cry_, Hawk resolved to remain strong. He may have lost Natalie, but he still had his son. And Gabe needed him now, more than ever.

"I spoke with Captain Dakota, Willis," Lieutenant Heat said. "He's, uh, he's denied your request, buddy."

Lieutenant Hawk looked up, suddenly looking more alert than he had in days. "What?"

"I'm sorry, Willis. The bastard's not going to let you see your kid, man."

Willis stood, suddenly feeling like he had a purpose again, a mission. "The fuck he isn't."

"Whatever you do, man, please don't deck the guy. That'll cause a big shit storm you don't need right now."

"You know my rules of engagement, Brandon. Don't worry," Willis replied as he stepped past his friend.

"Yeah, I know. I just wasn't sure you were still employing them," Lieutenant Heat said after him. Hawk had a policy of using brains and words over fists and brawn. It was only when someone he loved was in immediate danger that he used force. Even then, he wasn't into the whole causing-people-pain thing. He just wanted him and his family left alone.

Good luck, buddy, Lieutenant Heat thought to himself.

Meanwhile, Willis had already reached the end of the hall. A few more corners to turn and he'd be in front of Captain Jason Dakota's office. The man wasn't a bad commander, Hawk reasoned. He wasn't even heartless or cruel. So why wouldn't he let one of his pilots take some leave that would last a day roundtrip, tops? If it was using one of the orbital fighter jets that was a problem, Hawk would be more than happy to take civilian transport.

Finally reaching the door to the company commander's office, Willis drummed his fingers on the door. After a few moments of silence, he wondered why there wasn't an answer.

"Would you like to see Captain Dakota, sir?" a voice said behind him. Willis turned to find a young female sergeant giving him a courteous smile.

"Yes, I would," Hawk replied. "Notify him that Lieutenant Hawk is here, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir." The aide snapped to and moved towards the office. She rapped her knuckles on the commander's door, then walked in. Willis waited outside, strangely calm as he thought of what he would say to Captain Dakota. _My wife is dead, and my son needs me. And if you say no, you can shove that answer up your---_

"Go ahead, sir. The captain will see you," the aide said, emerging from the room.

"Thank you, Sergeant," Lieutenant Hawk said, and he entered Captain Dakota's office.

Saluting in front of the captain, Hawk stood at rigid attention and announced, "Sir! Lieutenant Hawk requesting permission to speak, sir."

"At ease. No need to explain, son. Lieutenant Brandon Heat has

informed me of your situation. I offer my sincerest apologies for your loss, Lieutenant," Captain Dakota said as he looked at the young officer standing before him.

Willis relaxed his posture at the order. He still had to take a deep breath before he could respond, though. "Then why have you refused my request, sir?"

The captain heaved a sigh. "There's a lot of shit that's been hitting the fan recently, son. Hell, we've just had to move the _entire_ _project_ to another planetary system. Do you have any idea what such a change entails?"

Hawk was torn between holding his tongue and giving his superior officer a verbal lashing. Eventually, he managed to settle on something that he hoped fit in the middle. "All due respect, sir, but do you have any idea what it's like for someone to lose his wife?"

Captain Dakota looked Willis dead in the eyes, and the lieutenant had the feeling that he'd just broken some unspoken taboo. "Yes, Hawk. As a matter of fact, I do."

Swallowing hard, Willis looked down at his combat boots before glancing up again. "Well, then, you should know better than anyone that I could care less about the project right now. Sir."

Lieutenant Hawk waited to be chewed out with no mercy.

The captain stared at him with a look that could have stopped a Hunter dead in its tracks. Finally, however, Dakota's eyes softened. The older man pinched the bridge of his nose and replied, "You've always been an exemplary officer, William."

Hawk's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "T-thank you, sir."

"Dammit, kid, you're one of the best pilots I've seen in years. And besides all that, I'm running out of reasons why I should keep you here."

"Sir, I---" Willis began, but the captain stopped him.

"Son, you'd better pipe down and listen, before I change my mind."

Willis opened his mouth to say, "Yes, sir." He quickly shut it, however, when he remembered what Captain Dakota had said. So, he simply remained silent.

"We need you here, Hawk," the captain said without preamble.

"I can't believe this," Willis said, unable to keep a hint of anger from his voice. He thought Dakota had finally relented, and instead he was trying to convince the lieutenant to stay.

"Lieutenant Hawk, you are _this_ close to insubordination. I suggest you learn to tight-rope better before walking that thin line."

"I need to see my son, _sir_." Willis articulated the words slowly and clearly, so the captain knew how serious he was.

"You didn't let me finish," Captain Dakota hissed. The older officer took a calming breath and sighed. Returning his attention to Hawk, he spoke again. "What I was going to say, Lieutenant, is that as much as we need you here, I realize what a difficult time this is for your family---and your young child in particular. Losing a mother is never easy."

Willis felt his eyes beginning to sting. Still, he maintained his composure in front of the captain.

"I'm going to give you three days, William, and that is it. You can take them all at once, or you can use them at your own discretion---provided there is no immediate threat. Do I make myself clear, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir!" Willis said, his vision suddenly clouded by tears.

"Good. If you choose to leave now and take all three days, I expect you back at 1730 hours on Thursday. Dismissed."

Lieutenant Willis Hawk saluted and performed a parade ground about face. Wiping his eyes and swallowing hard so that his tears didn't fall, the young officer started for his quarters. He had to pack, because he was finally going to visit his kid.

Walking briskly down the hall, Willis realized that Gabriel was the only part of his wife he had left.

40. Chapter 39: Laws of Physics

****Chapter Thirty-Nine: Laws of Physics****

****1346 Hours, March 1, 2552. Phase One, City of Cote D'Azur. "The Fight-or-Flight Response," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. Day Fourteen of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV****

Why can't I cry anymore?

The thought had been going through my mind lately. Or, really, it had been in my head since I'd seen Lieutenant Tracey Graham's lifeless corpse two days ago. Her death had been a rather gruesome one, messier than getting killed by plasma or even needles; Second Lieutenant Casey Frederick had told me that a camouflaged Elite had gutted her. That certainly explained why there'd been a huge pool of blood and entrails beneath the ranking officer. I suspected the alien's plasma sword must have severed her aorta to cause her to bleed out so fast.

I hadn't been much of a teary-eyed girl post-Ethan. Life's big events could get me going, just like anyone else; I'd certainly bawled my eyes out at my older sister Jenna's funeral two years ago, when she'd been killed in action. And tears of joy definitely streamed down my face when my son was born. For the most part, however, I'd toughened up after Ethan. Getting wounded wasn't enough to make me do it, and neither was witnessing most of the blood-and-guts of war. But I hadn't shed even one tear since before my deployment to Heath, and so much had happened since then. I knew something would eventually

cause my emotional dam to break, but so far nothing came.

I wasn't entirely sure if that was good or bad.

Graham, the psychology major, might have known. But she was dead now.

These days, I also found myself grappling with the fact that I was the new leader of Bravo Company. The lives of over one hundred Marines were now dependent on my decisions. If I messed up, it could mean the death of all of us.

The only thing I could do was my best, and hope that that was enough to see us through.

Presently, I had my platoon---no, my company, I reminded myself---keeping watch on the Lumiar River and surrounding streets. Although we'd taken the river two days ago, Covenant forces had managed to halt our advance. Ever since then, there had only been an empty silence on the frontlines.

I knew what that meant. Soon, the Covies would mount a counterattack; when they came, we had to be prepared. Erring on the side of caution for my first test as company commander, I'd set up the platoons in a defensive formation. Third platoon patrolled the streets, while first platoon kept watch on the Lumiar River. Second platoon, which had received the most casualties so far, was placed in reserve on our six. If the Covenant decided to attack, we'd have a platoon covering any eventuality.

Or, at least, that's how it was supposed to work in theory.

Besides changing up Bravo Company's positions, I'd spent hours the past couple of days attempting to hail anyone and everyone who might be left alive on Sigma Octanus IV. It was a long shot, I knew, based on both the media reports and what we'd witnessed up to this point. Still, as long as the frontlines were this quiet, there was nothing wrong with trying. So far, however, I hadn't succeeded.

Until now, that is.

"Attention UNSC forces," I said, broadcasting my voice on the general military channel. "This is Lieutenant Natalie M. Cooper, commanding Bravo Company of the 603rd, UNSC Marines. If any UNSC forces copy, please respond."

All I heard at first was the familiar crackle of static. Sighing, I was about to cut the connection when I thought I heard a broken message. I swear, if my hearing is playing tricks on me, I'm going to be really pissed off, I thought to myself as I strained to listen.

"Lieutenantâ€¦(static)â€¦this isâ€¦(static)â€¦" the voice seemed to be saying.

"Oh, for crying out loud, you little piece of shit," I said, taking off my helmet and giving it a hard smack with my hand. "Work, you damn---"

"Lieutenantâ€¦(static)â€¦Cooper, this is Major Dustin Andreas,

answering your transmission."

I couldn't believe my own ears. I quickly put my helmet back on, thinking this must be too good to be true. "Major Andreas, this is Lieutenant Cooper. Confirm receipt of message, sir."

"Read you loud and clear now, Lieutenant. God, it's good to finally hear some friendlies out there."

I couldn't help but grin. "Likewise, sir."

"What's your location, Lieutenant?" the major asked.

"My company and I are in the city of Cote D'Azur, sir," I answered.

"What happened to your captain?"

"Wounded, sir, and our executive officer was killed. I was next in line, so now I'm commanding."

"Jesus." There was a pause, and for a moment I was afraid our connection had been lost. Then, he said, "All right. Give me a sitrep, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. We're holding out ok for now, but we're cut off from our base. I'm also assuming that we're surrounded. We need reinforcements, sir, badly. There's easily a regiment of Covenant around here, and we're only one company that's not up to full strength, Major."

"I see." I heard static fill the channel, and I waited. Finally, the major's voice returned. "Well, I've got good news and bad news for you, Lieutenant Cooper. Which would you like to hear first?"

"Let's have the good news, sir."

"I can have my battalion mobilize to come help you out. We're nearby, just some miles south on the far side of the Lumiar River."

If I hadn't already been sitting down, I would have collapsed with relief. We just might make it out of this alive, I thought to myself with sudden glee. "That's great news, Major. My Marines will be---"

"Now, hold it, kid," Major Andreas said. "You need to let me finish before you get too excited. There's still the matter of the bad news."

"Yes, sir. I'm listening," I said, eagerly awaiting his next words.

"I'm afraid that we won't be able to send reinforcements for at least three weeks, Lieutenant. My battalion is fighting off a steel wall of Covenant infantry and armor."

My blood ran cold.

"I'm sorry, sir, but could you repeat your message? I'm absolutely positive I didn't hear right."

"You heard correctly, Lieutenant," the major said in a somber tone. "You'll be receiving back-up, kid. You just have to hold out for a while without us."

"Hold out for a while?" I repeated, incredulous. "All due respect, sir, but if you don't come to our aid in a timely fashion, you're effectively assuring our deaths. You're not even that far from us!"

"Again, I apologize, Lieutenant Cooper. This is simply the best we can do, under the circumstances. Surely you understand?"

"Do I understand?" I asked, anger lacing my words. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Now, there's no need to---"

"Three weeks?!" Finally fed up, I really lost it now. "In three weeks, we'll be a pile of corpses! Do you understand that, Major Andreas?"

"Lieutenant Cooper, you are being extremely insubordinate! I suggest you pull a one-eighty on your attitude right away, Lieutenant, or I'll be court-martialing you!"

"Court-martial my dead body, sir."

I switched the COM channel off and removed my helmet before the major could reply. We were one understrength company fighting an enemy force many times our size, with no reinforcements. Major Andreas, on the other hand, had a whole battalion at his disposal, was facing a smaller force, and was relatively close by. And he couldn't make it here to save us in less than three damn weeks?

Under any other circumstance, I would have kept quiet; it was never worth the trouble to take on a superior officer in a shouting match. Such disagreements were also disrespectful, and that just wasn't my style. After I'd seen what an idiot officer could do when I'd been in the Heathan forest, however, I decided speaking my mind---and in doing so keeping my men alive---was more important than following useless orders. With our chances of survival so slim, I didn't have to worry about getting time in the brig for my actions.

I took a deep breath and ran a hand over my hair, trying to calm down. I've tried every way I can think of to get outside help, I thought to myself. Now it's up to me to find a way to save Bravo Company.

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The Covenant counterattack came a few hours later, and it began in a rather subtle manner. At first, third platoon reported a sniper who would occasionally take potshots at them. Then, in a matter of minutes, one enemy sharpshooter had turned into a full-fledged assault. I could hear gunfire and blasts from Covenant Wraith tanks on the open channel with Third.

"Natalie, we need First here immediately. I'm getting my arse shot at

as we speak. Oh, bloody hell!"

"Dean?" Silence. "Dean! Respond, dammit!" I cried into the COM channel, my adrenaline spiking. The last thing we needed was to lose another officer.

"I'm all right, Cooper. Just had a rather close encounter with a plasma grenade, is all," the lieutenant replied.

"Hold 'em off for a sec, Lewis. I'm sending first platoon your way. ETA is two minutes," I said, picking up my battle rifle and starting to run towards my platoon.

"You'd better hurry, Lieutenant."

"Copy that."

Reaching first platoon seconds later, I pulled them from the river and had them begin their march towards third platoon. I opened the channel to Lewis a second time.

"Dean, first platoon is moving into position on your left flank. Make sure you check your FOF tags before you fire."

"I understand, Natalie."

"Frederick?" I asked on a separate channel to second platoon.

"Yes, ma'am?" Second Lieutenant Casey Frederick responded quickly, though I could hear the sleepiness in his voice. Bravo Company was working with stims once again, and we'd all gone far too many hours without sleep.

"Move one of your squads to the river. If attacking third platoon is part of a diversion to get past us through the Lumiar, I don't want to give the Covies that option."

"Understood, Lieutenant."

"And if your recon squad hears so much as a twig break, I want to be notified immediately."

"Of course, ma'am."

"Cooper out."

By now, first platoon and I had moved into position to reinforce third platoon. And the only thing I could think when I arrived was this: Wow. I had no idea so many Covenant vehicles could fit in a couple of streets.

A smoking Wraith tank and two Ghosts lay in pieces by the side of the road. Nearby, the bodies of three Marines lay disfigured in pools of blood. Eleven, I thought to myself bitterly. Eleven Marines dead out of the whole company since this shit started. And these are the first three who've died since I took command of Bravo.

"We used our last rockets on those vehicles," Lieutenant Lewis said, breaking into my thoughts. "We've no more ordnance, Lieutenant."

I didn't have time to reply. Four Brute Choppers rolled around the corner at just the same moment, and the words stuck in my throat.

"Hostiles coming in, northwest!" Lieutenant Lewis bellowed.

"I see 'em," I said, wondering how I made my voice sound so calm. "Listen carefully, Dean."

"Yes," the other officer said in a rush, a hint of panic lining his voice.

"Take two squads of third platoon and try to maneuver them around the building across the street. Circle that block and come behind the vehicles. First platoon will take care of the Choppers, and then you can deal with the Brutes. Quick and easy, Lieutenant."

"Y-yes."

"And Lewis? I want the other two squads of Third to engage the Covenant infantry. They'll be backed by my platoon."

"Acknowledged."

Picking off aliens with my battle rifle as I spoke, I looked down the weapon's sights and aimed at a group of Covenant up the street. A Jackal chose the wrong time to poke its head out from under its shield, and three bullets split its ugly head in a spray of violet blood.

"First platoon, get your ass in gear and advance!" I yelled into the COM. "Heavy weapons, I want you up here five minutes ago!"

I ducked out from my cover and sprinted for the other side of the street. The lead Brute Chopper took note of my movement and started strafing with its cannons. I kept running, half-crouched and holding onto my helmet with one hand---my other was hanging onto my rifle.

Now was when I was so grateful I'd taken track in high school and at the Academy.

I jumped over the pockmarks the Brute Chopper made around me, and I'd almost reached cover when a round exploded right in front my feet. And suddenly, unable to stop mid-stride, there was a hole with cracked asphalt right where I planted my boot. Despite years of training and my own attempts to keep my balance, I felt myself start to fall.

I landed hard on what would have been my face, if I hadn't had my helmet to protect me. The impact vibrated through my armor plates, but thankfully nothing cracked. My only real concern was getting back up fast to avoid getting killed in a second pass.

Too late. I heard the Chopper's weapons already firing, and puffs from tiny craters began popping up around me. My pulse pounded in my ears, and I was suddenly too scared to move. Somewhere in my rational brain, I knew if I stayed immobile, the rounds would surely hit me.

But I also knew that if I moved, I risked going into the line of fire.

I shut my eyes tight and waited for the end.

Then, a wave of heat and bouncing metal parts washed over me.

"Lieutenant? We've taken out the first Chopper, ma'am!" Lance Corporal Gardner said over the radio.

Opening my eyes, I lifted my head and looked around. The former alien vehicle was now a pile of burning wreckage not twenty yards from where I lay. It surprised me that I hadn't even registered the explosion that most certainly occurred moments ago. Fear was definitely a powerful emotion.

Glad to find I was still alive, I quickly pushed myself up from the ground and made it to the cover I'd been trying to get to earlier. I pressed my back against a slab of broken concrete and reloaded my battle rifle. With my weapon ready for more action, I lifted my battle rifle over the slab and looked down the sights.

An abnormally large and grinning alien face greeted me.

"Whoa!" I cried in surprise, involuntarily throwing myself backwards.

The Brute leaned over the slab of concrete that was my cover and continued grinning at me. It was an ugly, deranged smile.

Lying on my back on the sidewalk, I fumbled with the rifle in my hands. Just as I was situating the gun to fire at the Brute, its massive fist came at me. I closed my eyes out of reflex and braced myself for the pain, but I only felt a sting in my hands. When I opened my eyes again, I saw that the Brute had slapped my rifle away.

And now the alien bounded over the large concrete slab and grabbed me by my battledress jacket. Sweating bullets, I could feel my heart beating so hard I thought my chest would burst. _This is it, my last day, my last breath_, I thought. The Brute looked me in the eyes, widened its grin, and threw me.

I heard and felt a sharp _clang_ as my back armor plates hit against a light post---a light post that was at least ten feet from where the Brute had first grabbed me.

My ears were still ringing from the blow when I fell back onto the ground. I landed on my side and felt myself beginning to choke on something. Vision blurred and body screaming in pain, I rolled onto my stomach and tried to clear my throat.

I tasted copper in my mouth.

Disoriented and coughing up blood inside my helmet, I couldn't defend myself against the Brute. I heard the large alien stomp towards me, and then I felt a hard pressure against my helmet. _What's happening?_ I thought in a panic. It didn't immediately occur to me that the alien was trying to bust my skull open.

The Brute's leg came down harder and harder on my helmet.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhrrrrrrrrrgggggggghhhh!" I screamed as I felt my head getting crushed.

It was a raw and desperate animal scream.

41. Chapter 40: Don't Forget Me

Author's Note: I wrote the latter part of this chapter while listening to the song "Don't Forget Me" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers, so I'd suggest doing the same as you read. Got my chapter title from it, too. ;-) Hope you enjoy and please review! Peace!

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>Chapter Forty: Don't Forget Me**

0900 Hours, March 3, 2552. Phase Two, City of Cote D'Azur. "The Responsibilities of Leadership," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. **Day Sixteen of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV**

I still wasn't entirely sure how I'd managed to survive my encounter with the Brute. But from what I remember, my salvation came in the form of a 14.5mm round from an S2 AM sniper rifle. While I was busy getting my head reshaped into a pancake, Lieutenant Lewis's third platoon had finally come around the building. It was then, Lewis explained to me later, that one of his snipers saw a Brute crushing a Marine on the far end of the street. The sniper, Sergeant Skyler McCorse, didn't waste any time giving the aggressive alien a precise bullet through the back of the head. Severing the creature's cervical spine, the projectile caused the hulking beast to topple over, luckily missing the Marine as it fell.

Sergeant McCorse said it was only after he'd shot the Brute that he'd aimed his rifle at the Marine to see who it was. When he saw the name LT COOPER come up on his heads-up display, he was stunned to find that he'd just saved the acting company commander---me.

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"_Lieutenant!" _

_I heard the shout come through the COM channel, and I slowly began to open my eyes. _How come I'm not dead? _I wondered. _That Covie was going to flatten my damn headâ€|

Trying to take in a ragged breath, I found that I had to cough before I could fill my lungs with oxygen; the crimson blood that came from my mouth was thick and warm. I need to get this stupid thing off me_, I thought, struggling to keep my mind focused. _

_My attempt at moving my arms so I could remove my helmet failed. I

wanted to curse, but I ended up letting out a low moan instead. __On my second try I was able to move, but at a price: pain shot through my body like a lightning bolt as I popped the seal on my helmet. I slid it off my head with gritted teeth, then spat blood onto the pavement. _

_Finally, I managed to take a deep breath of air without feeling like I was suffocating---or drowning, for that matter---inside my helmet. It felt good to be able to breathe again, and the oxygen gave me the strength to roll onto my back so I could sit up. I groaned as a wave of pain nearly caused me to lie back down on the ground. _

Shit, I got lucky_, I thought to myself, despite the pain. _I can't believe I'm still here in the land of the living. Thank you, God. Thank you for watching out for me yet again.

_My head was pounding with excruciating pain, and the rest of my body protested as well. When I looked down at myself, I saw blood oozing slowly down my shirt and jacket from when I'd coughed up the blood in my mouth. _I must look like a fucking train wreck_, I thought._ But at least I'm not choking on my own blood anymore._Starting to regain normal hearing and sight by now, as well as alertness, I could feel the wet blood covering the lower part of my face. I wiped the red fluid away with my sleeve and reached for my helmet. I wasn't ready to put it back on just yet, but I wanted to have it in my hands._

_When I glanced down into the helmet, I saw the visor splattered with my blood on the inside. _Guess I won't be wearing this anytime soon, _I thought with the tiniest of grins. _

"_Jesus Christ, Lieutenant!" _

A man was suddenly in front of me, and it took me a moment to recognize him as Doc Reynolds. Concern was clearly displayed in his blue eyes as he raised his faceplate.

"_I-I'm ok," I said shakily. "I know I probably don't look it, but---"_

"_Are you kidding? You look fucking dead, El-Tee," a second voice replied. I lifted my head, blinked back the terrible pain the motion brought, and saw Second Lieutenant Laura Hillburn standing over me._

"_Get outta here!" Reynolds snapped, angry at the young officer for what she'd said._

"_Last time I checked, Doc, I'm pretty sure I was the one with the rank," Hillburn shot back._

"_Do. Not. Disturb. My. _Fucking_. Patient," Petty Officer Reynolds stated clearly in a threatening tone. "Ma'am," he added._

"_I know tempers are flaring since we haven't gotten any sleep. But can it, you two, right now," I managed to say._

Lieutenant Hillburn and the medic exchanged looks, then stared at me in astonishment.

"_What? Just 'cause I've got blood on my face I'm not allowed to give orders anymore?" I asked. I kept my expression and tone serious, even though I was amused by their reactions._

_Neither replied, but Doc Reynolds soon regained his composure.
"Ma'am, I need you to lie back down for me."_

"_Do you have any idea how much effort I put into sitting up?"
_

"_You bled from the mouth, Lieutenant. I need to check you for internal bleeding."_

"_Fine," I said._

The medic placed his hands behind my head and back to help lower me with the least amount of pain. Once I was lying on my back, he opened my battledress jacket and began feeling my stomach through my T-shirt.

"_Pain? Discomfort? Unusual sensations?" he asked as he pressed each quadrant of my abdomen. _

"_No," I answered. "Pain and discomfort, yes, but from other parts of my body."_

"_Where does it hurt, ma'am?"_

"_You mean where _doesn't_ it hurt?"_

"_Point taken." Doc Reynolds sighed, then announced, "I can't feel anything abnormal. No tenderness, no rigidity, no lumps. You check out." _

"_So can I get back to the company now? What's our status?"_

"_Just those first three Marines dead, and a few wounded. Nothing serious, though."_

"_Good," I replied, sitting up with a little less difficulty this time. I buttoned my jacket back up and said, "Then help me up and let's continue this shit."_

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Two days had passed since my run-in with the Brute, and I was still working through the aches and pains---my head especially. But I was gradually recovering, even though the bloodstains on my uniform tried to suggest otherwise. At the very least, I'd been able to use water from the river to clean the dried blood from my face and neck. It had taken half an hour of continuous---and vigorous---scrubbing to do so, but it worked eventually.

My helmet was a different story. I'd wiped the blood off the inside of the visor, but the blood that had seeped into the padding was too hard to get out with just water. So basically, the thing reeked constantly of my blood, and it often made me nauseous. As if that weren't enough, the two pictures I kept inside the helmet of my

family were now tinted a permanent shade of red.

But I was still alive and doing pretty well, and that was more than what could be said for others. Others like Lieutenant Graham, Private Beesner, the ten Marines we'd lost so far, and the critically wounded Captain Kingston. The poor man hadn't woken up yet, as third platoon's medic had predicted, and every day that went by, his chances of survival grew smaller.

Despite it all, there was at least one piece of good news out of the last forty-eight hours: today marked the start of Phase Two of Captain Kingston's operation to save Cote D'Azur. Bravo Company had finally managed to clear out the city, and now the hardest part of the mission---keeping the Covenant out---was just beginning. I'd already set up a perimeter around the heart of the city, and had ordered the platoons to maintain posts in various sectors. With one company in a large city, we were spread thin at best, but I did what I could with what I had at my disposal.

After a few early and unsuccessful attempts to break our perimeter, the Covenant must have decided they would take a moment to figure out a better plan; there had been a lull in the battle for the past hour or so. I'd used the time to organize some Marines from each platoon so we could distribute supplies. This way, when the Covenant's next attack came, Bravo Company would already be stocked with food, water, ammo, and medical supplies. As the selected group of Marines handed out precious equipment to the others, I went around with them to see how the rest of Bravo was faring. I spoke to the Marines of each platoon as a group, then walked down the perimeter and spoke to some individually. I offered them words of encouragement, even though I knew our situation was worse than what they'd been told by their platoon leaders. But in the end, speaking with my Marines had brought out a positive change: morale seemed higher than in days past, and I was able to demonstrate to the Marines that despite a couple of close calls, I was still functioning and in charge.

Presently, I removed my helmet and took a moment to rest; walking throughout the perimeter just days after my encounter with the Brute had taken it out of me. Leaning against a broken wall near first platoon's side of the perimeter, I slid my back down the surface until I was sitting on the ground. My muscles protested, but not nearly as much as they used to.

I've come close to exiting this world on two occasions now, I thought to myself. _And things are only going to go downhill from here. I guess it's about time I get this over with_. And so, I pulled out my datapad, focused the camera on me, and pressed record. This was something I'd wanted to do for a while now, and I finally had my chance.

"Hey, it's me," I began. "If you're watching this message, then I suppose it means I didn't make it. Talk about tough luck, huh? Guess I'll just have to see you on the other side.

"I just wanted to give my final messages to everyone, and I guess I'll start with Mom. I know it'll be hard for you, knowing you've already lost a daughter, but don't worry. I'll say hi to Jenna for you when I see her." I gave the camera a faint grin, then settled back into a serious expression. "You were great to all of us, Mom, and we'll never forget what you did for us after Dad died. I love

you, Mom.

"Mark, you're the best older brother any little sis could ever ask for. You drove me nuts, but you also looked out for me. And I'll always be grateful for the way you stepped up for the family after Jenna died. You're not just my brother, Mark; you're one of my best friends. I love you always.

"Little bro, you're next. I'm sorry for those times I got mad at you when we were younger. But, I mean, you did steal my make-up and embarrass me in front of guys all the time." I grinned. "And yet despite all that, I still love you to pieces, Trav. We had some good times, me and you, times I'll never forget.

"Allie, we always teamed up when Jenna got on our case. For all those days we played house and dress-up as kids, and those nights we'd stay up with our girl talk when we were older—thanks. You're one cool little sis, Allie."

Tears were starting to cloud up my vision, and I had to pause for a moment to compose myself. Addressing the last two people would really tear me up inside, and I didn't want to make them even more depressed when and if they had to see this video. So, I took a few breaths and put on a brave face before going on.

"What do I say to the most wonderful man I've ever met? You've been pretty much everything to me, Will: my partner, my lover, my best friend. You saved my life when you barely even knew me, and you've been there by my side ever since. No one will ever know me the way you do, so thoroughly. Thanks for all your support, love, and caring, and for always keeping your cool when I lost it." I gave him a smirk. "I like to think we balanced each other out nicely in that respect. Tell Jamie she was the greatest friend ever, and take good care of Gabriel. You're an amazing husband and father, and don't you forget that. I love you so much, Will.

"Gabriel, my little boy," I said with a smile, barely able to control my voice. I swallowed hard on the lump in my throat. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. If you're seeing this message when you're older, I've failed you. I wasn't able to be there for you like I should, and I'll feel guilty about it forever. Know that I want to be with you and your dad more than anything, but life's events have sadly kept us apart. And now, I'm no longer going to be able to be there for you in the future, kiddo." I paused to wipe the tears forming in my eyes, then continued, "I love you, Gabe, more than anything in God's entire universe. You are my life, son; as long as you live, I'll always be a part of you, even if I'm not with you physically. I'm proud of whatever you do, as long as you promise to be a nice, kind-hearted person and make good choices. Help people in need and love others, Gabe. Those are the greatest things you can do in this life. I'm sure you'll do all of these, Gabriel. Don't forget me, kid."

I stopped the recording and sat there in a kind of daze, shaking from my attempt to keep my emotions inside. I wasn't about to fall apart with my Marines nearby, but it was terribly hard to stay calm after making a video with your last words to those you loved. I took deep, slow breaths for a long time before I felt composed enough to save the message onto a chip. I prayed no one would ever have to see the thing, but it was necessary; if I didn't survive, I wanted everyone to know how much they meant to me. Finally ready, I stood and started

walking towards first platoon's lines.

"Doc? Got a sec?" I asked Petty Officer Reynolds when I found him.

The medic looked up from his seated position, his helmet lying beside him on the ground. "Yes, ma'am. Is something bothering you, El-Tee, or are you in any pain anywhere?"

Choosing to ignore his question, I instead crouched to his level. When he noticed that I didn't answer, he looked at me with questioning eyes.

"Can I ask you to do me a favor, Michael?"

I watched his expression change when I used his first name. He knew now that I had something important to say.

"Anything, Lieutenant," he said without hesitation, still searching my face for a clue as to what was going on.

I quickly dug into my pocket and produced the recording I'd made. I placed the chip carefully into a tiny case, then held out my hand for the medic to take it. Reynolds stared at the object for the longest time before turning his gaze back to me.

"Ma'am?"

"This is for you to keep, Michael. Please, don't let anything happen to it."

Doc Reynolds licked his lips and picked up the encased chip. "What is it?"

I took a deep breath and swallowed. "If I don't make it, I would like you to give that to my husband. The address is on the label," I said. Before the medic could reply, I added, "And Michael, I'm not asking you as an officer. You don't have to do this, but it would mean a lot to me if you did."

As realization slowly dawned, Reynolds began to shake his head. "No, Lieutenant. I won't do it, because you'll give this to him yourself."

I gave him a faint smile. "I would like nothing more than for that to be true, Doc. But we both know no one's immune to death. And let's face it: I probably have a better chance of departing than anyone else at this point."

"Why me, Lieutenant?" the medic asked.

"Because you're a good friend. And I trust you."

Reynolds continued to stare at the chip, no doubt mulling over my words.

"Michael?"

He glanced up.

"Would you please keep it for me?"

"I don't know if---"

"Listen, Doc, I know what you're thinking. You're worried that if I give you this, I won't have that same drive to live, right?"

Doc Reynolds shifted uncomfortably. "Well, no, not exactly---"

"This is an absolute last resort, Michael. I will fight harder than ever, because I know that if I don't survive, all my family will have left is a little five-minute video clip of me saying goodbye."

The petty officer nodded slowly. "Ok, Lieutenant. I'll do it."

"Thanks, Doc. I appreciate it."

"Yeah. No problem."

I started to walk away, but then I remembered something else. "Doc?" I asked, turning back.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"If Iâ€¦uhâ€¦you knowâ€¦"

"Yeah?"

"Could you make sure my son receives my dogtags?"

The medic's face revealed just a hint of surprise before he quickly masked his expression. "Of course, Lieutenant."

I nodded. With the conversation concluded, I started to head back to my post.

42. Chapter 41: Clear As Mud

****Chapter Forty-One: Clear As Mud****

****1120 Hours, March 3, 2552. Cooper Residence, St. Louis, MO. "The Return of Hope," Planet Earth. Day Sixteen of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV****

He stood in front of the door, wondering if he was truly ready to knock yet. He hadn't seen his son in several months, and that thought alone caused his throat to tighten. If he thought about the fact that his little boy's mother was dead, tooâ€¦he simply couldn't stand it.

All right, Willis, he said to himself. _Just do it. You should be happy; you're finally getting to see Gabriel. You've been waiting ages for this moment, and now you're hesitating?_

Hawk knew why he was suddenly conflicted. After all, everything had changed. He wanted desperately to see his son, but now he found that he was afraid of the emotions he would feel once he was face-to-face with his child. _The child I had with the woman I love, who's dead_,

he thought in anguish.

In a quick and almost mechanical motion, Willis rang the doorbell. It was as if his body knew his brain was in too much of an upheaval to make a decision, and so it took over instead. As he waited for an answer, however, he found himself growing more and more excited; he couldn't wait to see little Gabe.

Finally, the door opened.

"William! What a surprise," Natalie's mother said.

"How's it going, Mrs. Cooper?" Willis asked, his voice flat despite his effort to project enthusiasm.

"I'm doing well, thank you." She smiled. "I bet you came to see Gabriel, didn't you?"

Willis couldn't help but give her a small grin. "Yes, ma'am."

Her smile widened. "Well, come on in. He'll be happy to see you."

The young officer walked into his mother-in-law's home as she stepped out of the way. He looked around, trying to spot his son, wondering what he would say---

And suddenly, there he was.

Willis and Natalie's little toddler was sitting on the floor of the living room, playing casually with his toys. The fact that the boy could be so carefree when he had just lost one of his parents tore at Willis.

Having heard the doorbell and knowing a guest had walked into the door, Gabriel looked up. He immediately grinned when he saw that the newcomer was actually his father.

"Daddy!" the little boy cried, jumping to his feet and knocking over his toys in the process. Willis couldn't help but grin back at his son as he crouched and extended his hands. Gabriel ran straight into his father's waiting arms and was promptly enveloped in a fierce hug.

Willis cradled his son for a long time, rubbing his back and kissing his hair. Gabriel giggled and smiled, but Willis was fighting to keep his tears at bay. He still had to deliver the awful news to his happy little boy.

"Hi, Gabe," Willis said. "I've missed you a lot, kiddo."

"Miss you, Daddy," the boy replied. Stepping back from his father, Gabriel looked up and grinned.

Hawk had always been struck by how much his son took after him. Gabe was like a miniature version of himself, complete with the light brown hair and everything. But right now, all Willis could focus on were his son's shining green eyes.

Natalie's green eyes.

He quickly wrapped his little boy in another hug. "I love you, Gabe."

"Love you, Daddy."

"Ok, kiddo. Why don't you play with those toys for a bit while I talk to Grandma real quick?" Willis asked, knowing it was best to get this over with.

When he saw his son nod vigorously, Willis walked towards the kitchen where Natalie's mother was standing.

"Are you hungry, Willis?" she inquired as he entered the room.

"Oh, no, thanks, Mrs. Cooper," he replied. He hadn't had much of an appetite in recent weeks.

Noticing his grave expression, Natalie's mother sat down on the kitchen table and motioned for Willis to do the same. When they were both seated, she was the first to speak.

"I heard about what's happening on Sigma Octanus Four," she said, shaking her head. "I'm just grateful that my children aren't anywhere near that place. After I lost Jenna, my oldest, I couldn't possibly go through that again." She glanced at Willis and found him gaping at her in surprise. "Did you lose someone there you knew?"

"Natalieâ€¦" Willis croaked. "Mrs. Cooper, Natalie was there."

"I thought she was on Heath." The woman put a hand to her chest as a terrified look came upon her face. "And what do you mean she was on Sigma Octanus?"

"The Covenant glassed the planet."

"You've obviously been misinformed," the woman said, calming down a bit. "That was the media's initial report, when they had no real idea what was going on. The planet hasn't been glassed, Willis. Most of it, yes, but not all of it."

"Where? I mean, which part was left untouched?" Willis asked, hoping against hope that she'd say Cote D'Azur.

The expression on his mother-in-law's face became somber once more. "That's the problem, Willis. No one knows the answer to that, except for the forces on the ground. And they've been out of contact since the start of the invasion over two weeks ago."

"Soâ€¦Natalie might still be alive?" That would explain why I haven't received an official notification that she was killed in action, he thought.

"Willis, I'm sure I don't have to remind just how big even a small planet can be. The Covenant have spared one small area, and that's all we know for sure."

Willis wasn't sure what to believe at this point. At first, he'd had hope when his mother-in-law said some part of the planet had been spared, but she was right. The chances of Natalie being on that one

portion of the planet were slim. Still, he had to hang on to some hope---any hope.

"Why would the Covenant do that? Just save a single area and lay waste to the rest?" Willis asked, his brain trying to make sense of the confusing and emotional situation.

"I wish I knew the answer to that." She reached across the table and grasped her son-in-law's hand as her eyes grew watery. "All we can do is pray, Willis. We have to pray that she's still alive, somewhere on that ruined planet."

43. Chapter 42: Flight Without Wings

Author's Note: Thanks for all the reviews, you guys rock!!! Here's the next chapter for your reading pleasure, the longest one in the whole story. ;-) Hope you like it, please remember to leave reviews after you read (they are pure awesomeness!), and peace!

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>Chapter Forty-Two: Flight Without Wings**

0215 Hours, March 7, 2552. Phase Two, City of Cote D'Azur. "The Scars of Battle," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. **Day Twenty of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV**

I was born the middle child in a family of five kids. I had learned at a young age what it was like to be both a follower and a leader, because I had two older siblings and two younger siblings. I also knew what it was like to fight for the essentials of life---back when I was a kid, that meant things like breakfast cereal, my own room, and attention.

Even now, years later, I was surprised to find that things weren't much different. I still fit nicely in the middle ground, commanding and obeying various groups of people. And, since our supplies had started running out yesterday, there was still that fight for life's essential materials.

This time, however, we would actually die without them.

I'd ordered the company into reduced rations of food a few hours ago. Now, whenever we'd send out patrols, the Marines were under orders to loot any homes or buildings they passed for useful equipment. Operations to purify water from the Lumiar River had also begun, and we were doing ok in the food and drink area so far. The only things we couldn't get more of at the moment were medical supplies and military gear.

As it was, I'd spent the last six days toting around my silenced pistol. The personal sidearm was my only defense against hordes of aliens after that Brute had chucked my rifle and I. Looking at my web belt, I discovered that I had another problem: there was just one clip of pistol ammo left in my cartridge pouch. Once I finished the three rounds I had in the chamber, I was going to be pretty well screwed.

"Corporal Garian," I said on a private COM channel. We were both currently on perimeter duty, and he was on the opposite corner of the city block I was on.

"Lieutenant?" he answered promptly.

"I need more firepower, so I'm heading to the supply closet to see what I can scrounge. Watch my side."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't worry, Gary. Be back in a flash."

I walked slowly away from the forward lines, then started to run as fast as my various injuries would allow. There was no way in hell I was going to use a Covenant weapon as long as there was a tiny chance I'd be able to find a human one. But deep down, I knew that in the days to come, I would perhaps be forced to make such a decision in order for Bravo Company to survive. After all, we couldn't very well hold the lines without guns and bullets.

With help from the map on my HUD, I was finally able to find the building where we'd been hiding our rapidly depleting supplies. We'd changed the location a few times, just to keep the Covenant guessing in case they thought they'd found our cache. The strategy was working for the time being; our storage areas had gone undetected so far.

Entering the building---a small apartment complex---I immediately headed to the far side of the lobby. Once there, I opened the door to the stairwell and jogged down the steps to the basement. Before I walked into a hail of lead from the armed guard inside, I knocked three times on the door.

Our identification system was primitive, but it served its purpose. Three knocks meant the commander, two knocks meant a changing of the guard, one knock meant trouble outside, and no knocks, of course, meant Covies.

The door was opened a few seconds later by the current guard, Corporal Rachel Simmons. Her partner, Private Tom Foster, stood just behind and to the left of her, aiming his submachine gun at the entryway. I'd told Bravo Company previously that when they were on guard down here, they were to take no chances.

"Lower your weapon, Private, it's just me," I said, stepping into the room.

"Yes, ma'am," Foster replied, slinging his gun over his shoulder.

"What brings you down here, El-Tee?" Corporal Simmons asked.

I removed my helmet and ran a hand over my hair. After weeks without a shower, it wasn't exactly looking its best, but I was able to take small comfort in the fact that no one else in the company had been able to clean up, either. "What I really need is a new gun, Corporal. But, since I know we don't have that, I'll settle for some ammo for my pistol. I'm down to just a few rounds, and if I get in a tight

spot, I'm cooked."

Simmons exchanged a look with Private Foster, and they grinned.

"What?" I asked.

"About that gun, Lieutenant," the corporal said, glancing sideways at Foster.

"You said to pick up anything useful when we were out on patrols, ma'am," the private began. "Well, I was on patrol yesterday, El-Tee, and we went back to where we had that skirmish a few days ago." His expression grew somber for a moment. "We managed to pick supplies off those three dead Marines, ma'am. Two of the Marines' weapons were part of the wreckage, but there was a lone and functioning MA5C nearby. One Marine had four clips of ammo for it on him, and we still have some in here."

For a moment, I was torn between being happy that I'd found a weapon and being sad for the way I'd managed it.

Finally, I shook my head. "I can't believe we've resorted to looting our own for equipment," I said. _But shit, we really need it_, I added silently to myself.

"I-I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn'tâ€|you saidâ€|" Private Foster stammered, misinterpreting my statement.

"You did the right thing, Private. That's exactly what I told you to do."_ It's still just a little hard to accept_, I thought. Sensing the young Marine's discomfort, I gave him a smile. "Thanks, Foster. I have a feeling I'm going to owe you my life for this."

Private Foster straightened and quickly put a serious expression on his face. "Just doing my job, ma'am."

Corporal Simmons gave the private a look that said, "Kiss-ass," though I knew she'd never utter the words in my presence; I could tell Foster was going to catch hell for his line later on. Noticing the silent exchange, I was barely able to keep myself from laughing. Sometimes, I thought life in uniform would have been more entertaining if I'd been an enlisted Marine rather than an officer.

But, then again, it was much more fun to be a goof-off _and_ in command.

"All right, let's check this baby out," I said.

"Yes, ma'am," Foster replied, turning around to face a shelf full of boxes of supplies. Laying across the top shelf in the back was the assault rifle; the private lifted the weapon and handed it to me.

Cradling the gun, I took out the magazine and did a quick inspection. MA5Cs were lighter than their predecessor (the MA5B) and each clip held a little over half the number of rounds. While this made the MA5Cs both more portable and more maneuverable, they also required more frequent reloading. I wasn't sure if the trade-off would end up

working in my favor, but right now that didn't matter. I had a powerful weapon in my hands again, and that was good enough for me.

Satisfied that the assault rifle was clean and seemed to be in working order, I slapped the magazine back into the MA5C and checked the safety a second time. It was still off.

I held the gun in my left hand, barrel facing the ground, and took the four clips Foster had salvaged. Placing the magazines in my cargo pockets, I looked back at the two guards. "Carry on, Marines."

"Yes, ma'am!" Corporal Simmons and Private Foster exclaimed in unison.

As I walked back up the stairs, I thought briefly about test-firing the assault rifle. With no silencer, however, I didn't want to panic the Marines or tip off Covenant lurking nearby. So, I'd just have to pray it worked when the time came.

I was almost at the entrance in the lobby when I thought of something else. _I'm here now, so might as well_, I thought to myself. I turned around and headed back to the stairs, this time going up one level. _First door on the right_, I reminded myself. When I reached it, I rapped my knuckles against the door three times, as I'd done below.

As soon as the door opened, I felt my heart collapse.

"Lieutenant Cooper! I was just trying to hail you, ma'am," third platoon's medic, Petty Officer First Class Erika Calden, said in a rush. Her face was ashen as she swallowed hard. "The captain justâ€¦just died, Lieutenant."

I stood there in the doorway for a long time. Somewhere in my mind, I was hoping I hadn't heard right, that this wasn't really happening. But I knew. That damn rational brain of mine _knew_, and it took me a moment to get over the initial shock.

"Shit," I finally said.

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It was interesting, really: the morning it stopped raining was also the morning Captain Jeremy Kingston breathed his last. At thirty-seven years old, our captain was now just another name on a growing list of casualties in the Covenant War. Petty Officer Calden said Kingston had received a skull fracture that day in the parking garage, and after so long without treatment, his body finally succumbed to the trauma wound.

The death of our true and trusted company commander hit Bravo hard. When I heard the news, I couldn't decide what I wanted to do more: scream in rage or cry in grief. But, in the end, the Covies made the choice for me when they attacked second platoon's part of the perimeter. Now I could let my anger loose and do something useful with it, like protect my company.

"How many are there, Lieutenant?" I asked over the COM channel to Second Lieutenant Frederick. I ran down the stairs, raced past the lobby, and exited the building where we kept our supplies.

"I don't know, El-Tee," Frederick answered. There was the sound of the officer's battle rifle going off, then his voice returned. "A fucking lot, that's for sure."

"Can you hold them off, or do you need reinforcement?"

"An extra squad would be nice, ma'am."

"All right. I'll be there. Cooper out."

I quickly cut the connection, took my new assault rifle off safety, and opened a new channel. "This is Lieutenant Cooper. First squad, first platoon, I want you on me. The rest of you plug the hole that leaves in the perimeter. Double time it, Marines." I uploaded my location to their respective HUDs, then started sprinting through the streets to second platoon.

The gunfire and plasma flying through the air was thick by the time I reached second platoon's position.

"Came outta nowhere a few minutes ago," Lieutenant Frederick said on a private channel. "Looks like a reinforced patrol, ma'am. Probably trying to break through our lines to do a little recon."

"We need to deal with those Ghosts first, Lieutenant," I replied, surveying the scene with my night vision field binoculars. "Do you have any ordnance left?"

"Yes, ma'am. One rocket, if I remember correctly."

"We're out, Frederick. You're going to have to improvise for the other two Ghosts."

"Understood, El-Tee." He paused for a moment, then added, "Ma'am, there's also a second patrol team staked out in that department store."

"I see it. Two buildings down on the left, three stories?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Lieutenant, I want those Ghosts and the patrol on the street taken out. First squad and I will deal with the Covies in that building."

"Yes, ma'am."

"If you find you need more back-up, call up the rest of First."

"Roger that."

"First squad, let's move!" I said into the radio. The squad had rendezvoused with me as I'd been listening to Second Lieutenant Frederick's report.

By taking the alleyway to get to the department store, first squad and I managed to avoid contact with the Covenant team on the main street. Once we'd reached the back service entrance, I had Private First Class Jimenez override the electronic lock to get us in. We couldn't afford to waste any bullets or explosives on doors.

"All right, Marines. This place has three levels, and the Covies could be hiding anywhere. Keep your eyes peeled and watch those motion trackers. If you're about to bust into a room, check infrared. Lieutenant Frederick reported movement on the top floor, but we'll clear each story. Understood?"

Green acknowledgement lights winked on my HUD.

Here goes nothing, I thought, holding my rifle to bear and beginning a visual sweep of the room. As I walked through the ground level with half of first squad in tow, I could feel my heart thumping hard against my chest. Hiding behind any of these clothes and appliances could be an alien ready to shoot you dead before you even knew what was happening.

"Negative contacts, Lieutenant," Corporal Trevor Dandh breathed into the COM.

I glanced in the corporal's direction, an involuntary action. He was checking the opposite side of the floor with the other half of first squad. "Confirm on IR, Corporal," I ordered.

"Confirmed, ma'am," Dandh answered.

"Ok. Fall in behind me and proceed up to the next level."

I took point as I lead first squad up a flight of stairs to the second floor. By now, my recently battered body was really letting me have it for all the sprinting I'd done earlier, but I tried to stay focused on the task. I had to think of anything, _anything_ other than the pain.

I had to bite my tongue to keep from grunting up the stairs.

The first thing I did when I reached the next floor was check my motion tracker. Other than the eight yellow dots behind me (Simmons and Foster of first squad were still on guard duty), there was only a blank scanning ring.

Switching to infrared as I walked deeper into the store, the results still showed nothing. _Come on, you damn Covies_, I thought. _I know you're not all holed up on the third floor. There's gotta be someone down here, at least to sound the alarm that hostiles are approaching._

That's when I saw the eerie green glow of a plasma pistol up ahead.

"Get down!" I shouted into the radio as I went prone.

The overcharged shot sizzled above my helmeted head, and an instant later I was back on my feet. Aiming down the sights of my assault rifle, I spotted the lone Grunt crouched between a row of mattresses. _Hope this thing works, because I'm very dead if it doesn't_, I

thought as I squeezed the trigger.

There was a sharp yelp as the Grunt's body jerked backwards and dark blood erupted from its chest.

"Search for additional contacts!" I ordered over the SQUADCOM. Creeping up to the Grunt in a half-crouch, I quickly searched the dead Covenant soldier for anything useful. Lucky for me, the little bastard had two plasma grenades on him. I strapped the explosives to my web belt, then stood to my full height.

Bad idea.

A spray of needles came hurling in my direction. As I ducked back down, I could hear the Marines of first squad beginning to fire their automatic weapons.

"Contacts! Three Grunts and two Jackals, Lieutenant!" Corporal Garian exclaimed.

With nine Marines against five lowly members of Covenant infantry, the skirmish was almost over before it began. But, in the end, that didn't matter; the brief firefight had served its purpose.

"We need to get to the third floor now!" I said over the COM channel. "Those SOBs now know we're here."

As soon as I made sure there weren't anymore Covenant on the second floor, I had my squad follow me up the stairs to the third. Sure enough, plasma and needles were already coming our way before I even reached the top of the landing.

All right, baby, do your job, I thought as I unhooked one of my two plasma grenades. The explosive glowed a bright blue as I primed it, momentarily lighting up the stairway. With only a few seconds before it blew, however, there was no time to sit there and admire the thing. I tossed it into the room, hoping it would take at least one of the aliens out.

I heard an Elite roar somewhere nearby, and then I hugged the stairs as the grenade exploded. "Move it, move it, move it!" I yelled, getting back on my feet and storming up the last few steps. As soon as I reached the top, I went into automatic mode, sighting my rifle and firing off quick, precise bursts. First I dropped a Grunt on my left, then another beside it, then another. In the meantime, my squad of Marines came up on either side of me and began doing the same.

Once we'd taken down the first group of Covenant, we stepped over the dead and bleeding corpses and marched forward. Plasma rounds started coming at us shortly after, and I found myself ducking behind display tables and mirrors. A mess of clothes were being shredded and catching fire in front of me.

"This place is about to go up! Let's finish this!" I cried.

Emerging from my cover, I let loose a long burst of fire at a black-armored Elite close by. The alien's translucent shield flickered for the first several rounds before finally giving way. With its shields dead, the Elite glared at me and leveled its plasma

rifle at my chest.

Or, at least, that's what I was expecting it to do.

Instead, even as I was trying to gun him down, the Elite ducked under my line of fire and ran at me. Growling like a rabid animal, the alien hit me in the midsection with such force that it knocked the wind out of me. The Elite sent me crashing into a rack of shirts and bumped against me.

Leaning against the rack, I managed to get one of my legs free from the sea of clothing underneath us. I gave the enemy soldier a hard kick in the torso with my combat boot, and the creature stumbled back ever so slightly. Fortunately, that was all I needed.

I held up my assault rifle and fired into the Elite's chest.

Click. Click.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," I said, more out of complete and utter shock than panicked fear.

My clip had just run dry.

I threw the rifle on the ground and quickly reached for my silenced pistol. The Elite, however, was already coming at me. _The hell? Why doesn't it just shoot me?_ I thought. I glanced instinctively behind me, and the answer became clear. _Oh, shit_. I'd finally gotten my pistol in my hands when the Elite drove itself into my stomach a second time.

I shut my eyes tight as my back crashed through the wall-sized window, shattered glass flying everywhere. When I opened my eyes a second later, I could see the Elite lying on the ground, still safely inside the building.

Me?

I was rocketing to the ground three stories below.

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Water.

That was the liquid I could feel on my face, wasn't it?

"Jesus, Lieutenant, you really need to learn when to take a break," a disembodied voice said.

"Is she coming round, Petty Officer?" a second male voice with a British accent asked.

"Yes, sir. Looks like it."

"Good. I'm not sure I could command this company like she can."

"Lieutenant Cooper? Can you hear me, ma'am?"

A wave of pain rolled through my body before I even opened my eyes, and I ended up groaning a response.

"Can't you give her any morphine? She's clearly in terrible pain."

"We don't have much left, sir. We should save it."

I finally managed to open my eyes a crack, but all I could see were two blurry shapes in front of me. When I tried to speak, a second shock of pain made me groan again.

"Easy, ma'am. Take it slow."

I shut my eyes and opened them a second time, hoping the results would be better. Sure enough, this time I could at least figure out who the blurry shapes were. After all, how could you miss seeing that burst of red hair?

"Dean?" I asked, my voice scratchy and barely qualifying as a whisper.

"You got it, mate. And your fine medic Petty Officer Reynolds, as well."

"Whatâ€¦"

"What happened?" Reynolds finished. "You fell three stories, Lieutenant, that's what happened."

"You're like a walking miracle, Natalie," Lieutenant Lewis added. "Well, not walking quite yet, butâ€¦"

"The water...is it..."

"Diaphoresis," the medic said.

"What Mr. Medical Terminology means, Lieutenant, is that you are perspiring."

"From the pain, ma'am."

"Hence my advocacy of morphine."

"N-no. Keep it." The blurry figures before me were finally starting to focus, and I blinked several times to get a clear picture.

"Natalie? Are you certain?" Lewis asked.

I tried to grin, but the effort was too much. "Youâ€¦won't understand, boys. But afterâ€¦giving birthâ€¦with no medsâ€¦"

"I can only imagine," Lieutenant Lewis said, grinning. "My wife nearly crushed my hand while our daughter was being born."

"You sure she didn't just not like you, El-Tee?" Reynolds asked.

"You'd better hold that tongue of yours, Petty Officer," Lewis replied in a mock serious tone.

"Yes, sir." The medic turned back to face me. "All right, Lieutenant, I'll give you the full report."

"I'm...curious," I said.

"Well, first, do you remember anything that happened?"

"Not...a whole lot."

"Elite tackled you out of a window. Ring a bell?"

"Now that you mention itâ€¦" All I could really remember was the sensation of falling, falling to what should have been my death. I cringed as more pain lanced through me.

"I want you to take it easy, ma'am. And this time, you have to listen to me."

"Tell meâ€¦what else happened," I said, ignoring his last statement.

Reynolds gave me a scolding look, but obeyed. "You fell out backwards. Luckily, the glass dispersed over enough area that you weren't in danger of getting sliced up. Your armor and helmet took the brunt of the force when you hit the ground, which is why you're even still here and breathing. Something must've broken your fall, but we didn't have time to figure out what."

"Your medic here had to treat you quickly. And we also had to find a new helmet for you, Natalie. Yours was in two pieces when we found you. But you needn't worry, because we found your pictures inside."

"How long...was I out?"

"Ten hours, ma'am."

"Christ. What about...the lines? The company?"

"They're being taken care of, Natalie. Now is the time to worry about yourself. You haven't yet heard your list of injuries."

I looked at Doc Reynolds for clarification.

"Well, the final tally is this, ma'am: you have one gnarly concussion, and three broken ribs. Two of the ribs that broke were the ones that had been weakened by the shrapnel on Heath. The other one is on your left side. Like Lieutenant Lewis said, you're one helluva miracle, ma'am."

44. Chapter 43: Roll With the Punches

****Chapter Forty-Three: Roll With the Punches****

****2401 Hours, March 15, 2552. Phase Two, City of Cote D'Azur. "The Ides of March," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. ****Day Twenty-Eight of the**

Battle of Sigma Octanus IV**

"Happy Birthday, Coop."

A grin began to appear on my face, small at first but gradually growing larger. I couldn't believe he was going to do this again.

"You ass," I said, grinning ear-to-ear. "I swear, Will, if you've sent me another birthday video of you mock-stripping, I'm going to throttle you."

Last year, on my birthday, Willis thought I'd get a kick out of such a video. Admittedly, it definitely wasn't a bad assumption on his part; I had indeed enjoyed it. What I hadn't enjoyed, however, was the severe reprimand I'd received when my commander had found it on my datapad. I was slapped with a "possession of contraband material", given a long lecture, and had to clean the barracks head as punishment. I didn't help my case much when I protested that it was only a joke on my husband's part, and nothing like the real thing. He hadn't, after all, gone so far as to strip completely naked.

Thank God. Otherwise, I'd have really been in hot water.

I'd explained the story later to Willis, and despite my angry tone, he'd found the whole thing hilarious. And so, it wouldn't have been very surprising if he'd chosen to do the same act this year. I had to say that I'd been amused by the odd turn of events as well, but I'd never admit that to my husband, of course. He was supposed to feel bad for getting me in trouble, and instead he had only laughed harder.

I'll get back at you, Will. Don't you worry, I thought smugly. I'd been planning such a move for his birthday this year, but I decided it would be more of a blindside if I postponed it. After all, I had over nine months to record something good: Willis's twenty-fifth birthday had been in January.

And today, finally, it was mine.

My husband's annual recorded birthday message began to play on my datapad a minute after midnight. Fortunately, pre-loaded messages for holidays and the like were allowed by UNSC military mail regulations---as long as they followed strict rules. This year's video was dated in October of 2551, several months after we'd both had shore leave together.

"So? How's it feel to be twenty-five like me, Coop?" Willis asked, speaking as though he'd recorded his message in the present. "Did you enjoy having a couple of months where you could pretend you were a year younger?"

"You are asking for it, Mister," I said to Willis's smirking face on the video.

After a long pause, he winked at me and added, "Just kidding, honey."

So the man does know his place, I thought with a smirk.

"Well, I've got a lot of people here who want to give you their best wishes, so I'll keep my speech short, sweet, and to the point. I love you, Natalie, and I hope this message finds you safe and well on your big day. You are my everything, Coop, and I don't know what I'd do without you. Hope to see you soon, honey." Willis suddenly bent down and out of the frame, and a moment later his face reappeared. My husband was now holding a small box up against his cheek. "See? Here's the present I got you. I'll give it to you the next time I see you after your birthday, but in the meantime, you can have fun guessing." He flashed that gorgeous smile of his at me, and I started to blush despite myself.

Willis then leaned closer to the camera, and he had that mischievous twinkle in his hazel eyes. "Of course, I'll have to wait till we see each other face-to-face to give you your real present. If I showed it to you now, this video would probably get censored and confiscated," he said, winking at me a second time.

"Eww! Will, you're so disgusting!" I heard somewhere off-camera. Suddenly, a fist came into view to the right of the camera as my best friend and Willis's little sister, Jamie, punched him in the arm.

I had to bite my lower lip to keep from laughing hysterically. Jamie had no idea that her older brother was actually alluding to the mock-strip fiasco.

"Ow! Jamie, you don't even know what I'm talking about!" Willis argued.

"Come on, Will! How stupid do you think I am?"

"You're not even supposed to be here! Everyone gets a private filming, genius. That was the rule."

"Yeah, well, now you're breaking different rules---"

Willis stood from the chair he'd been sitting on, and in the background I could see him playfully shove his sister out the door.

"Sorry 'bout that, Coop," he said once he was seated again. "But you know how she can be, right? Anyway, I love you and happy birthday, Natalie!"

Jamie came storming back into the room then, and my husband gave up his seat before she got really angry. Sitting on the chair, Jamie looked over her shoulder to make sure Willis was gone before she began.

"Seriously, Coop, I have no clue how you can put up with him. Why can't you see that he's an inconsiderate perv?" She sighed, then finally grinned. "But, he's a good older brother, and I know he loves you a lot. Plus, you guys gave me the best little nephew in the world!"

"And happy birthday! Twenty-five, Coop, that sounds like an exciting age! I just hope you're not spending it on some miserable and war-torn planet. Let's hope that by the time Gabe's second birthday comes around, this whole mess will be over. I hope I get to see you soon, Natalie, and please, save my brother from himself. Remember,

you're the only one who can do it. Love you like a sister, Coop!" Jamie waved, and then walked out of the room.

Willis and Jamie's parents recorded a short message next, wishing me a festive day and telling me how much they loved their grandson. The video seemed to cut out then, but after a moment I saw Willis walk back into the room. This time, he was holding our son.

"Here's a surprise for ya, Cooper," Willis said, smiling into the camera. He glanced down at Gabriel, sitting in his lap, and whispered, "Can you say 'happy birthday', Gabe?"

Gabriel, barely a year old at the time of the recording, just smiled and giggled.

"Seems to me our boy's a little camera shy, Coop," Willis said, turning his attention back to the center of the video. "But, I know he'd like to wish you a very happy birthday, and many more to come."

Willis gently grabbed one of Gabe's arms and had him wave. After that, the video ended with the pair grinning widely at me.

I sat there staring at the blank datapad screen for a while longer, smiling to myself. Willis had definitely made up for his botched attempt at humor the year before with this adorable video. Perhaps it was time to forgive and forget, right?

I smirked. _You're not getting yourself out of this one, Will. I know how you operate, and it's on_.

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It didn't take long for the ugly reality of my current situation to return to the forefront of my mind. In all honesty, I hadn't even thought of my birthday these past few weeks---or even the past few months, for that matter. All I'd had time to think about was how to keep my Marines and myself alive.

At the moment, however, I was acutely aware of the fact that I was still breathing.

Eight days had passed since I'd taken that fall out of the three-story window, courtesy of a nasty Elite. Doc Reynolds had wanted me to stay immobile and out of the fighting for over a week; instead, I was back in command of Bravo Company in two days. I knew it wasn't the best choice for my health, but it was what my company needed. I had promised myself after the battle in the Heathan forest that I'd never leave my Marines, no matter what, and I was keeping that promise.

Even if it meant I had to endure all this damn pain.

I'd had awful headaches the first few days after the fall, and my ribs still hurt when I inhaled. During my first perimeter watch, I'd also suffered from an intense bout of dizziness that nearly sent me tumbling to the ground. And hell, I'd vomited more in the days following the accident than when I'd had morning sickness with Gabe.

Concussions sucked.

The Covenant, of course, didn't take a break just because I was in terrible shape. On the contrary, the bastards increased the number and severity of their attacks against our lines. Low on all kinds of supplies by now, my company was barely hanging on; I had a feeling that it was only a matter of time before the Covies penetrated our thin and worn out lines.

But if they succeeded, that would be the end of everything we'd worked so hard to save. If our perimeter collapsed, the Covenant would slaughter Bravo, occupy the city, and get whatever it was they had come for. Once that happened, the aliens would high tail it off-planet and glass the rest of the surface.

Ultimately, failure to hold the lines guaranteed our deaths.

Motivated by this knowledge and the fact that I'd been feeling better the past two days, I made another trip around the perimeter. Most of the Marines I saw looked hungry, tired, and haggard. Those I spoke to also had caked blood and dirt on their uniforms, and a good portion had at least minor wounds from the weeks of constant combat.

Some took advantage of my presence on their post and removed their helmets; that's when I saw the beaded sweat, the sunken eyes, and the gaunt faces. If you were to judge their collective state of mind by looks alone, you'd say we didn't stand a chance against the Covenant.

But, despite everything, Bravo Company had yet to suffer its fourth victim since I'd taken command. We'd gone two weeks without having to list a Marine as KIA, and that had boosted morale throughout the company. I could only hope that the inspiring but brief speeches I gave to the platoons had positive effects, too.

If only Major Andreas's battalion would have reached us, maybe we would have had a better shot at surviving. _Well, maybe we ended up buying some other UNSC forces more time_, I thought to myself. _I just hope we did some good, _any_ good, as long as I know we're not going to die in vain._

"Mind if I sit with you for a moment?"

"Huh?" I said, snapping out of my reverie and glancing up. The sudden movement of my neck sent my head whirling. Good thing I was already sitting down.

Lieutenant Dean Lewis took off his helmet and smiled. "I'll take that as a yes, Natalie."

He sat down next to me, and then brought his knees up to his chest, mimicking my seated position.

"What brings you my way, Dean?" I asked him, pulling off my own helmet. God, was it nice to breathe fresh air every once in a while. Well, as fresh as air on a battlefield could be, I supposed.

"Just came to see how you were recovering."

I gave him a rueful smile. "Let's just say I'll be living out my last few days in pain. But at least I'll know I didn't skip out on my duty."

Lewis was quiet for a moment before he replied.

"Natalie," he began slowly, "I must confess I heard about your feud with Lieutenant Smythe. For the record, you should know that nearly dying from a wound does not qualify as abandoning your men, or your post. From what I understand, Smythe was just an arseface trying to push your buttons, nothing more. Don't take whatever he said to heart, Natalie. I've seen what you do every day for these Marines, and the last thing I'd call such devoted attention and concern is abandonment."

I couldn't help but shake my head at the irony. "That lucky son of a bitch. He transferred just after my husband gave him a good scare, and then the invasion began." I glanced at the red-haired lieutenant and offered him a small grin. "But thanks, Dean. Coming from you, that means a lot."

Lieutenant Lewis grinned back. "Just thought you should hear the truth before we depart from this world."

We were both silent for a few minutes, just sitting quietly side-by-side.

"Today's my birthday," I said after a while. "And you know what's funny? I had no idea until I received a pre-recorded message from my family."

The other lieutenant's blue eyes lit up. "Really? Well, happy birthday, Cooper."

"Thanks, Dean."

"Am I allowed to inquire as to your new age?"

I shrugged. "Why the hell not?" _Might as well forget about silly taboos at a time like this_, I thought. "Twenty-five. I'm now officially twenty-five years old."

Lieutenant Lewis nodded. "I'm sorry you had to experience a shift to your next year of life this way. Shame it's going to come to a rather abrupt end."

I snorted. "Yeah, you could say that again."

"Shame it's going to---"

I chuckled, and Lewis grinned briefly.

"Dean, what's my son going to do without me?" I asked a moment later, serious again.

"Not sure, Natalie. I keep asking myself the same question about my daughter," the lieutenant answered.

"How old is she?"

"Three. Emma is beautiful, just like her mother." Dean smiled, no doubt picturing their faces. His expression changed after a moment and he turned to look at me. "What about your little one?"

"Gabe will be two in a few months." I quickly ran both of my hands over my face and took a deep, painful breath. "Fuck, Dean. I don't want to die here. I want to see my kid and my husband again."

"I know, mate," Lewis said. "If I told you I didn't feel the same way about my family and this horrible situation, I'd be lying. We'll just have to fight, Natalie. Fight to the very last."

"Yeah," I said. "We'll go down swingin'."

45. Chapter 44: Keeping it All Together

Author's Note: Thanks so much for all the feedback! Reviews are always wonderful, so please keep 'em coming. Hope you enjoy and peace!

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>Chapter Forty-Four: Keeping it All Together**

1430 Hours, March 15, 2552. Cooper Residence, St. Louis, MO. "The Confession," Planet Earth. Day Twenty-Eight of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV

First Lieutenant Willis Hawk departed from his base in Denmark a couple of weeks later, taking his second day off. He'd spent the whole time in between strapped into a cockpit, and the constant maneuvers had left him pretty exhausted. Still, he had felt the uncontrollable urge to visit his son. Though he didn't want to admit it, Willis had the uneasy thought that his compulsion was caused by a sort of sixth sense; he just couldn't escape the feeling that somewhere, something was going very wrong.

And, of course, that led to the logical conclusion that Natalie was in trouble.

You don't know that, Hawk reminded himself. _She could already be dead, and it was always only a hope that she might still be alive._

In any case, things weren't looking too good: either Natalie had been killed in the initial invasion, or she was in danger of getting killed now.

"Shit," Willis whispered, running a hand over his light brown hair. _I just wish I knew what the hell was happening over there!_ he thought.

After arriving at his mother-in-law's home, Willis didn't let on that he had a bad feeling about his wife's safety. He greeted Natalie's mother and gave his son a big hug. He spent a few hours playing with Gabe before his mother-in-law called him into the kitchen.

"Willis, I need to speak with you," the woman began when they were seated at the table. Willis sat at the far end, just because it was the best angle to keep an eye on his young son while they talked.

"Sure thing, Mrs. Cooper," Willis said. He hesitated, then added quietly, "Today's her birthday."

"Seems hard to believe, with all that's happening," Natalie's mother said. "But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about."

Willis gave her a quizzical look, and the woman paused briefly before going on. "A number of years ago, your parents told me why they named you William. Do you know what your name means?"

"What?"

"It means protector. You are their first-born son, and it makes sense that you would be there to guide your younger siblings."

Willis gave her a sad smile. "Yeah, right. I was real good at protecting Matthew, wasn't I?"

"You've carried that death on your hands all these years, William, and yet you've never realized that it wasn't your fault."

"He was my brother," Willis said, his voice just a step away from cracking. "Seven years old, Mrs. Cooper. He was seven when he died, and I was eighteen. Who do you think should have been there for him?"

"William, you cannot blame yourself for things that happen out of your control. Were you going to single-handedly take on a Covenant ship, before you were even trained for such missions?"

"Why are we talking about this?" Willis asked, growing frustrated.

"Because I want you to understand that you fit your name perfectly, William. Even if you can't see that."

Willis was beyond perplexed. "Yeah, but why now?"

His mother-in-law took a deep breath, and he could see the tears well up in her eyes. _She feels it, too_, Willis thought with a mounting panic.

"I don't know what's happening on Sigma Octanus Four, Willis. The media has been unable to receive any reports, even from orbit. But ifâ€¦if Natalie shouldâ€¦" her voice trailed off and she put a hand to her mouth. Blinking back her tears, the woman looked at Willis again. "There's just something I wanted to tell you, something she doesn't---and can't ever---know about."

Willis swallowed hard. "Ok."

She hesitated for a moment before saying, "I know what you did for her all those years ago, Willis."

"Huh?" he asked, wondering where this was going.

The woman gave him a faint smile. "Playing innocent to the end, right? I'll admit, that's very commendable."

"Really, Mrs. Cooper, I'm kind of lost. What are you---"

"Ethan," Natalie's mother stated simply.

At first, Willis thought he hadn't heard right: in fact, he was sure that he'd misinterpreted the word. "Iâ€¦I'm sorry?"

"I know about Ethan, Willis. Of course, I didn't actually find out until a few years later, but I do know." She shook her head. "I never really did believe his story about Natalie getting mugged that day."

"You know?" Willis asked, incredulous. "But she wasn't the one to tell you?"

"It's a complicated---and classified---story. Suffice it to say that through my work with the Office of Naval Intelligence, I came to know about this particular incident."

Willis just sat there, blinking at her.

His mother-in-law couldn't help but offer him a second smile. "Think about it, Willis. Didn't you expect me to give Natalie a long talk about getting married at twenty years old?"

His cheeks flushed. "I guess so."

"When I found out about your part in removing Ethan from her life, how you stood by her and helped herâ€¦I knew then that she was choosing wisely." Natalie's mother paused. "After that, I was sure you truly loved her enough to make that commitment."

"I've always loved your daughter, Mrs. Cooper. Natalie and Gabe mean the world to me."

"Good answer, Willis." She grinned briefly, then sobered. "Do you understand what I said about your name yet, William?"

After a few seconds, he nodded slowly. "Yes, ma'am. I think I get it now."

"You protected her, Willis. You did exactly the right thing, and you did much more than what was expected of you. And for that, I will always be grateful."

The table grew quiet, and remained so for several minutes. Finally, Willis got up the nerve to break the silence.

"I only wish I could save her now," he said softly.

46. Chapter 45: Facts of Life and Death

Author's Note: Just a word of caution, there's a lot of language in this chapter due to the situation. Do what you must to mentally prepare, lol. Hope you enjoy, please please review, and peace!

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>Chapter Forty-Five: Facts of Life and Death**

2117 Hours, March 22, 2552. Phase Two, City of Cote D'Azur. "The Final Hours," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. Day Thirty-Five of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV

My father, Commander Adam Cooper, was killed by the Covenant in a naval battle when I was four years old. At that young age, I wasn't sure what people meant when they said Dad was gone. I went to the funeral, felt some emotion, and cried, of course. But through it all, the actual concept of My daddy is dead! never really hit me. It was only as I grew older that I began to realize what death was and what death meant.

It meant missing someone, wanting to hear his voice or see her smiling face. It meant that no matter how much you wanted or how badly you needed these things, you could never have them again. No more trips to the park, no more sharing ice creams by the pond; you would never see that person anymore.

And yet, sometimes, you would.

I'd lost track of how many dreams I'd had, even now that I was an adult, about my father. Sometimes he was just part of some crazy dream I was having, and other times he was the center of it all. Either way, I took comfort in the times I was able to spend with him while asleep.

So now that I was facing this mysterious thing called death myself, I smiled at the irony. Looks like I'll finally get to see you again, Daddy, I thought. And Jenna, too. God, I've missed you guys so much.

That was the reason why I hadn't changed my name when I'd married Willis. My name was the last link I had to a beloved father who had been taken prematurely; as long as I was a Cooper, I could still be a part of him in some way. Willis, being the great man that he was, understood my choice and didn't try to change my mind. He knew I had no qualms about adopting his name, if only the circumstances were different.

"Frederick! Don't let 'em through!" I shouted over the radio, unleashing a spray of bullets from my MA5C. My platoon's first squad had recovered the weapon the day I'd fallen, so at least I didn't have to worry about not having a gun.

"There's too many, El-Tee!" Second Lieutenant Frederick's shriek was filled with fear.

"I said hold the fucking line! I don't care how you do it, just do it!" I'm not going to die. I'm not going to die. I'm not going to fucking die here! I thought to myself.

A blast sounded from a Wraith tank, and I ducked instinctively as a huge blue sphere flew over my head. The enemy ordnance hit a building

a few hundred feet behind me, and the impact made the ground beneath my combat boots quake. Between my healing head injury making the surroundings shaky and the vibration from the explosion, I was quickly knocked off my feet.

Get up, get up, get up! I thought, picking up my assault rifle and aiming down the sights once more. The Covenant coming towards us were charging now, dozens of Brutes, Elites, Jackals, Grunts, Hunters, and Drones. And they'd come with the back-up support of three Wraith tanks and six Ghosts. _How the fuck do they keep coming up with more armor, vehicles, and personnel?_ I wondered desperately. Though, in the end, I suppose the how and the why didn't matter so much.

This was what I'd feared all along: an all-out assault on our feeble perimeter. Bravo Company's lines had been absolutely silent for three days, and each day I had grown more and more nervous. The enemy had launched their attack over an hour ago; it began in a subtle manner, with just a couple of patrol teams at first. I hadn't thought much of the skirmish with third platoon, because it was so damn normal. But the Covies were clever fucking bastards. They initiated a similar "standard" assault on second platoon's lines a few minutes later, then did the same with first.

And after that, they'd consolidated their forces and called in reinforcements.

I'd had no choice but to pull first and second platoons off their watches and bring them up to Third's position. I knew that would leave the Covenant with wide-open flanks to either bypass our forward line or maneuver to take it out, but it was a risk I had to take. The alternative would mean the utter annihilation of third platoon and a breach in the center of our perimeter. At least this way, we had a slim chance of keeping the aliens where they belonged: out of Cote D'Azur.

"We have to fall back, Lieutenant! We can't hold them off!"

"There is no fallback point, Frederick," I said, stunned by the calm in my voice. "This is our stand, right here, right now. You hold that line, Marine."

"Yes, ma'am!" came the shaky reply.

"Cooper, we have incoming mortar! The whole bloody sky is coming down on us!" First Lieutenant Lewis cried.

Running across the street with small-arms fire trailing me the whole way, I jumped over a piece of rubble and crouched behind it. I could hear the shrill of needles hitting the other side of my cover as I paused to reload my rifle. My ribs shuddered with pain as I sucked in rapid breaths, and my heart was thumping so fast I could have sworn I'd developed tachycardia.

A glowing green plasma round hurtled just centimeters over my helmet.

"That's it," I said, slapping a fresh magazine into my assault rifle. I peaked over the rubble and squeezed the trigger. The long burst tore through several Grunts and a couple of Jackals before I heard the _click_ of a spent clip.

"Give me a fucking break!" I screamed at my weapon as enemy rounds assaulted my cover once more. Instead of trying to reload again, I unhooked a plasma grenade from my belt and tossed it at the Covenant troops. _That should keep 'em busy while I rearm_, I thought. As I put in yet another fresh clip into my MA5C, I radioed Lieutenant Lewis.

"Lewis, what's going on at your end?" I asked, remembering his transmission a few seconds ago.

"Two Wraiths are blasting the bloody hell out of us, Lieutenant!" There was a pause as Lewis fired his submachine gun, then his voice filtered through my helmet again. "We've no more grenades, no more rockets, and we're truly and royally fucked."

"Try anything and everything, Lewis. I'm sure the Covies wouldn't mind lending you the ordnance, if you just blow their faces apart first."

"Yes, that'll do."

"Give me a report in a few minutes, Dean."

"Of course, Lieutenant."

"Cooper out."

During the brief conversation, I heard an explosion a few yards away; my grenade had finally gone off. Lifting myself above the rubble, I saw pieces of three Grunts and an Elite on the street ahead of me. Beside the dead were their still-living comrades, lying in pools of blood after being caught in the blast. _Not bad for one grenade_, I thought to myself. _That's what I call effective use of limited resources._

Too bad that there were still dozens of Covenant soldiers heading in my direction. It was definitely time to high-tail it out of here.

"Hillburn!" I radioed.

"Yes, ma'am?" The young officer sounded beyond spooked by the whole situation.

"I've finished up my recon of this sector. You've got a Wraith tank, three Ghosts, and plenty of infantry headed for first platoon's line. I'm coming back now, and I want defenses set up by the time I get there."

I heard the lieutenant swallow hard before replying, "Yes, ma'am!"

_This shouldn't be too hard, _I thought, trying to psyche myself up._ Outrun a shitload of Covies with really big guns, three zippy vehicles, and one massive tank. Put your running shoes on and sprint like hell, Cooper._

I could hear the sounds of the aliens getting closer and closer to my position. If I wanted to at least make it to first platoon alive, I

had to leave pronto.

I quickly checked my rifle to make sure it was properly loaded, then took a deep breath. Despite wincing as I stood, I was up and running faster than I ever was in any track meet.

Zigzagging as I sprinted down the street, I managed to avoid the multitude of plasma rounds and needles that were hurtled my way. Blasts from the Wraith tank thundered through the air, however, and shattered glass and pieces of debris were falling just steps behind me; I had to really push myself to keep running at this pace, or I'd end up getting cut and crushed.

My ribs were screaming and my head throbbing when I finally reached first platoon.

Once I got to their fortified positions, I barely managed to sit down. A combination of the sprint, my wounds, and the stark terror I felt was making my heartbeat fast and my breathing rapid. Pressing a hand to my right side, where I'd broken two ribs just a couple of weeks ago, I shut my eyes as intense pain enveloped my upper body. The third and final broken rib on my left wasn't giving me any freebies, either.

"Are you all right, Lieutenant?" The voice flooded through my helmet.

Still breathing hard, I opened my eyes and saw a Marine crouched down in front of me.

"Ma'am? Should I get Doc?"

"No, Dandh. I'm fine," I lied.

"I can't see your face, El-Tee, but I can tell you're hurting."

"Corporal, there are going to be Covenant crawling out of your ass soon if you don't get back to your post."

"Yes, ma'am." The corporal remained crouched for just an instant longer before he obeyed and stood to leave.

Come on, Cooper, you can do this. Get your breathing under control, and then it won't hurt as bad. Push the pain to the back of your mind and return to the fight, where you're supposed to be, I thought.

"First platoon, this is Lieutenant Cooper," I said as I got back to my feet. "Listen carefully: the next wave of Covenant will reach our defenses in two minutes. They're coming with Ghosts, they're coming with troops, and they're coming with a tank. Our first priorities are the vehicles. When we've taken those out, we go for the Hunters, then the Brutes, and then everything else. Clear?"

"Yes, ma'am!" the platoon chorused. I could hear the unease in their voices, mirroring what I felt. But I was their leader. Even if I knew we were about to be killed and overrun, I still had to find a way to make them fight. Until I breathed my last, I wasn't going to give up the perimeter we'd worked so hard to maintain.

"I don't want to see any heroics, Marines. I want you to use your heads, keep your wits, and stand your ground. Things are going to get rougher and they're going to get uglier, but we have to find a way. We cannot and will not let the Covenant take Cote D'Azur. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!" First platoon's voices were steadier this time.

"Semper fi, Marines! Let's give 'em hell!"

"Oorah!" They screamed the cry louder than they ever had before.

And then the first shots of plasma started coming our way.

"Open fire, Marines!" I shouted into the platoon-wide COM channel.

The sounds of dozens of rifles, submachine guns, and shotguns filled the air. Up on the rooftops behind us, the sharp _cracks_ of sniper rifles echoed through the night. I watched from my position on the city hall steps as aliens fell dead, one-by-one, on the street. But no matter how many of the bastards my platoon eliminated, more would simply take the place of those who were killed.

I waited until the Covenant were closer before I began firing my assault rifle; the enemy had been out of effective range, and I didn't want to waste precious bullets. The last time I'd swapped magazines before coming back here, I only had three clips of ammo left. After that, I was down to a clip and a few rounds of ammo for my silenced pistol. And after thatâ€¦I probably wouldn't be alive to find out.

"Incoming!" Second Lieutenant Laura Hillburn suddenly yelled.

I quickly took out my field binoculars and saw that the Wraith tank was bringing up the rear of the enemy advance. That didn't stop it from firing its long-range mortars, however. The first salvo the mammoth armor launched seemed to be heading straight for the top of the city hall building.

"Jesus, they're going for the snipers!" Hillburn shouted.

"Get the fuck outta there!" I ordered, shoving my binoculars into my pocket and holding my rifle to bear once more.

But the mortar round was already on its way. Through some kind of error, the huge ball of plasma veered to the left as it flew through the air. It ended up missing its initial target and falling short instead. And if I remembered correctly, it had fallen right where my young platoon XO and third squad were fighting.

"_Hillburn_!" I screamed.

Tapping Corporal Dandh---who'd been fighting next to me---on the shoulder, I motioned for him to follow me as I raced across the steps. _No, God, please, not this all over again_, I thought as I ran. _Not another kid's blood on my hands. Not another Private Beesner scenario._

When Dandh and I reached third squad, we found a smoking crater in their midst. Crouched behind statues and heavy concrete, most of the Marines were dazed but fine. Three of them, however, lay bleeding on the ground—and one of them was Second Lieutenant Hillburn.

"Medic!" Corporal Dandh exclaimed. The young noncom and I continued firing on the approaching Covenant as we waited for Doc Reynolds.

As soon as he arrived, the petty officer began triage. "This kid's dead, Lieutenant. The damn mortar blew him completely in two," Reynolds announced.

"Dammit," I muttered. _I can't believe another one's gone_, I thought.

Doc Reynolds looked down at PFC Keith Barker's bleeding body parts and gave a slight shudder. Lance Corporal Shawn Rivers was next, and he had blood oozing from his lower leg. The medic inserted biofoam into the wound, then quickly wrapped it up in a bandage. "You'll be ok, Rivers. It's a deep wound, but it didn't get the bone. Think you can walk?"

The young lance corporal tried to stand, and thankfully his weight held. "Hurts like a mother, Doc. But I think you guys need me, so I'll stick around."

"Thanks, Rivers," I said. "Glad you made out all right."

"Wouldn't miss this, ma'am."

"Doc? What about Hillburn?" I asked him.

Moving on to the lieutenant, Doc Reynolds checked her pulse. "She's out cold, El-Tee. And all that blood on her shoulder? Broken clavicle, maybe sternum, too." He paused, then turned his visor towards me. "But don't worry, ma'am, she's alive."

"Thank God. Ok, try to get these two Marines into the building. That'll be your makeshift infirmary for as long as we can hold the Covies off, Doc."

"Yes, ma'am."

Meanwhile, the Covenant continued firing at our lines. Mortars were coming down, Ghosts were strafing, and small arms assaulted our cover. Our five machine guns were working overtime, shredding the aliens to pieces, and our snipers were still getting headshot after headshot. But the wave of aliens was inexhaustible.

As I ripped through a few Elites trying to climb up the steps, my clip emptied again. I tossed out the used magazine, put in the new one, and realized it was my very last. _I'll just have to really be effective with these rounds, make sure I hit good targets_, I thought.

"Cooper!" Lieutenant Lewis's sudden cry made my adrenaline spike.

"Dean! What's happening?"

"We've held our lines, Lieutenant! Your trick with the grenades worked! We managed to disable one of the Wraiths and kept firing on the bastards. Natalie, they're actually retreating. Isn't that absolutely brilliant?"

"What? Retreating?" I couldn't believe my own ears.

"Yes!"

"Ma'am! Same phenomenon's happening here, too," Second Lieutenant Frederick radioed. "I think they're realizing that we're a lot tougher than they thought. Once we had a tank knocked out, they started to backpedal. We took out tons and tons of infantry, and there was plenty more where that came from. But, for some reason, they didn't push forward. I don't understand, Lieutenant. They could have easily slaughtered us, even without armor."

While this news should have been exciting, all it did was make my blood run cold. The Covenant had us heavily outnumbered, and they ran just because we destroyed a couple of their support vehicles? And why were they still fighting first platoon if the others had left?

"Frederick, Lewis, I want your platoons to get to First's position. Double-time it, Marines."

"Copy that!" they both answered.

"Gunny Hills!"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Lieutenant Hillburn has been wounded, and you're our platoon XO," I explained.

"Understood, ma'am." There was a pause, then, "Uh, ma'am? Are you seeing this?"

I took my finger off the trigger of my assault rifle and looked out in front of the building. I'd been so concentrated on the aliens before me that I hadn't noticed that the Covie tank had disappeared. The Ghosts were suddenly gone, as well.

And now, I could see the infantry scrambling to leave.

"I'll be damned," I whispered.

What the hell are they doing? I thought. Although I was grateful for the break---and the fact that my company and I were still alive---I wondered what the Covenant could be planning. This had to be part of some elaborate scheme.

"I see 'em, Gunny," I replied. Then, opening a company-wide channel as the sounds of battle died down, I said, "Bravo Company, this is Lieutenant Cooper. The Covenant are indeed in retreat, but do not let your guard down. I know this seems like a good time to take a break, but that's exactly what they're counting on. Things may be

quiet for a few minutes, or maybe even a few hours, but they will be back. The enemy will regroup and try again with the next wave of troops; this has already happened three times in the last two hours, so you know the drill by now. This is far from over."

Acknowledgment lights winked green, but no one spoke.

Several minutes later, Lieutenants Lewis and Frederick announced that their platoons had arrived. They took their positions on either side of first platoon, and then Bravo Company waited.

Forty silent minutes had gone by when the COM crackled.

"Lieutenant Cooper?" It was Second Lieutenant Zackary Samson of Third.

"Go ahead, Samson."

"Do you hear that noise, ma'am?"

I strained to listen, and finally knew what the lieutenant was talking about.

My insides turned to mush as I heard the distant rumble of tanks, vehicles, and infantry.

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"Holy shit! They're ours!" someone shouted over the COM. "Yeah!"

I thought I was going to die of relief when I heard the excited announcement. I thanked God about a thousand times, too, for this was nothing short of miraculous.

"Confirm with visual," I ordered.

"Ma'am, confirmed!" Second Lieutenant Frederick said. "Those are UNSC Scorpion tanks, Warthogs, and ODSTs, Lieutenant!"

Cheers rang through the COM.

"Oh, Christ, Cooper. I really thought we were done for," Lewis said to me on a private channel.

"Me, too, Dean," I said lamely, too shocked to think of anything to say.

"No, really. I'd already picked out a casket and everything."

I just couldn't help it. I started to laugh hysterically, like an idiot, and I couldn't stop. I wasn't sure if I was finally releasing the horrible tension of the past several weeks, or if it was Dean's morbid but surprisingly funny joke. More likely it was some strange combination of both.

It took me a few minutes to calm down enough to hail our newly arrived allies.

"This is First Lieutenant Natalie Cooper, UNSC Marines, commanding Bravo Company of the 603rd. UNSC forces please respond," I said into the general channel.

"Lieutenant Cooper, this is Captain Henry Schaeffer, XO of the 21st ODSB Battalion. We've got four Scorpion tanks attached to our unit, as well as a few Warthogs. Confirm your identity, Marine."

"Yes, sir. First Lieutenant Natalie Cooper, UNSC Service Number 38221-50486-NC, sir."

"Confirmed, Lieutenant. Why don't you come meet me inside City Hall?"

I grinned. "My pleasure, Captain."

After ordering Bravo Company to watch the lines for activity, I walked up the steps we'd spent hours defending alone. When I reached the top, my head and ribs were giving me hell, and yet I couldn't have been happier. I entered the building and found a young brown-haired, blue-eyed Helljumper talking to Doc Reynolds. He seemed to be about Lieutenant Dean Lewis's age, twenty-eight, and I had to admit he was pretty good-looking.

"This is our commander, sir," Petty Officer Reynolds said when he saw me walk in.

"Sir!" I said, standing at attention in lieu of a salute.

"Your medic had great things to say about you, Lieutenant," Captain Schaeffer said. "At ease. So I hear your company has been holding Cote D'Azur for over a month, is that right?"

"That's correct, sir," I answered.

"And your previous commander?"

"CO and XO of Bravo Company are dead, Captain."

"Damn, you guys've really had it rough, huh?"

"You don't know the half of it, sir."

"So why don't you fill me in, Lieutenant? Then I'll give you our story, and I'm sure it's one you'll never forget."

As ordered, I gave the ODSB a quick but thorough synopsis of our part of the battle. He, in turn, explained that he'd been working on getting through to us for weeks. Turns out that Europa Base had been under siege this whole time, with control of the base going back and forth between UNSC and Covenant forces. It was only recently that humans had taken the base back for good and started to push forward with their counterattack. Finally cracking the strong enemy lines, Europa Base sent Schaeffer's battalion on a mission: the ODSBs were to find the company that had been sent on patrol and never came back.

In other words, they had come to find us.

47. Chapter 46: Sprint to the Finish Line

Author's Note: As I mentioned in the introduction, my version of the battle on Sigma Octanus IV is different than what occurred in the canon version. Therefore, the end of the fighting won't be the same as what was described in Nylund's *The Fall of Reach*. I hope you'll still like it and enjoy it, though. ;-) Please please leave reviews after reading and, as always, peace!

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>Chapter Forty-Six: Sprint to the Finish Line**

1644 Hours, March 27, 2552. Phase Three, City of Cote D'Azur. "The Last Fight," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. **Day Forty of the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV**

Phase Three of the late Captain Kingston's plan had begun five days ago, when the 21st ODST Battalion finally found Bravo Company of the 603rd Regiment. We had finally reconnected with at least a portion of Europa Base's remaining UNSC soldiers, and for the past few days, we'd been trying to force the Covenant off Sigma Octanus IV. Even with tons more troops, plus armor and vehicles, however, the fighting had been as rough as ever.

But now, we had two things we'd had very little of five days ago: help and hope.

Suddenly, we had ammo, food, water, medical supplies, and manpower. I'd been down to my very last clip the day the ODSTs found us, and now I didn't have to worry about how many bullets I was using. As long as I took out as many alien bastards as I could, that's all that mattered.

The Covenant had continued their en masse attacks against Bravo Company's perimeter the same day the Helljumpers arrived. The Covies had come intent on wiping out the decimated group of Marines, but what they got instead was a UNSC force matching theirs in number and strength. The aliens had fought us for over forty-five minutes before they realized their task was infinitely more difficult than it had been just a couple of hours ago. And ever since then, they'd been assaulting our now-fortified lines on and off for several days.

Each time the Covies came back, however, they'd fight a little less longer and a little less harder. I'd lost track of just how many Wraith tanks and Ghosts our Scorpion tanks had blown to kingdom come; we'd lost two tanks ourselves, but the ratio was almost incomparable. We were finally starting to win, and today, I felt especially positive about our chances of ending this long battle once and for all.

"Glad you could make it back, Hillburn," I said, grinning.

"Good to be back, El-Tee," Second Lieutenant Hillburn replied, flashing a grin of her own.

"We've missed you out here the past few days, kid. How's the shoulder?"

"Hurts like all hell, ma'am. But I didn't want to spend any more time than I needed to in Doc Reynold's makeshift hospital. No disrespect, ma'am, but that medic is freaking anal about everything."

My grin suddenly widened. "I know what you mean all too well, Hillburn. But he's also the best damn medic in the Corps."

Just an hour earlier, Doc Reynolds had taken a break from his other patients to check on my wounds from the fall. It had been three weeks since I'd gone flying out the window of the department store, and the medic said my concussion was just about fully healed. I still had occasional headaches and dizziness, but nothing like all the migraines and vomiting I'd experienced before.

My ribs were a different story. After being hit by shrapnel on Heath, they hadn't been that great to begin with; when the Brute had thrown me against a light post, that had made things even worse. Obviously, hitting the ground after falling three stories really wasn't helpful, either. So those, Doc Reynolds had said, would take several weeks of light duty and bed rest to heal.

To his credit, Petty Officer Reynolds wasn't even surprised by my negative reactions anymore. He simply acknowledged that that kind of treatment wasn't my style, and he'd said, "Well, the best advice I can give you, El-Tee, is to try not to work them too much. And if you do, expect a longer recovery period and lots of pain. Now that you know the risks and what'll happen, feel free to make your own choice."

Funny, though, that the Covenant always seemed to choose health matters for me.

"Can't argue that, Lieutenant," Hillburn said, replying to my earlier statement about Reynolds. "Broke my collarbone and sternum five days ago, and here I am on the lines again."

"Lieutenant Cooper, ma'am?" my aide, Corporal Kaleb Garian, asked as he approached.

"I'm listening, Gary. Tell me the Covies have departed, and you'll make my day."

Garian smiled faintly and shook his head. "Sorry, El-Tee. No such luck there. Actually, Captain Schaeffer wanted me to relay a message to you."

"Oh, yeah? What's that?"

"He sent out a platoon of scouts twenty minutes ago, and he says they've reported Covenant activity. Looks like they're mounting their final assault, Lieutenant."

"That's the opposite of the information I requested of you, Corporal."

"Yes, ma'am." He gave me an apologetic look before going on. "He said he wanted to let you know so you could prepare your company."

"Tell him I've received his message, and let him know Bravo will be

ready."

"Yes, ma'am."

Lieutenant Hillburn and I exchanged glances.

"Well, you've heard the news, Lieutenant," I said to her. "Round up first platoon, and make sure they're stocked up on all they need. I'll prep the company."

"Got it, El-Tee."

"Bravo Company, this is Lieutenant Cooper," I said over the radio. "Our ODSST buddies have just informed me that the Covenant are headed this way once again. They're bringing everything they've got, and we think this could be their big last stand."

"Things are going down right here, right now. Let's kick some ugly Covie ass one final time, Marines."

"Yes, ma'am!" my company chorused over the company-wide COM channel.

"All right. Let's finish this, Bravo. Cooper out."

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It didn't take long for the Covenant force to show up. Bravo Company and the battalion of Helljumpers, however, were ready for them. The scouts Captain Schaeffer had sent ahead had returned just ten minutes before the Covies came, and so they were the first to engage the enemy. As soon as the Wraiths and Ghosts showed up, the captain had sent out his two remaining Scorpions, plus the last five Warthogs.

"Ok, Bravo, hold steady. Hold your fire until they get closer, then take aim and give it to 'em," I said over the COM channel, looking down the sights of my MA5C. I tried my best to take slow, even breaths, as much to keep the pain in check as to calm my nerves. Of course, with all that was riding on this final showdown, I couldn't really control my breathing as well as I would have liked.

Come on, ribs, I thought to myself, gritting my teeth against the sharp pain. _Just hang in there for a little bit longer._

At the same moment, I saw the first enemy rounds start to head in my company's direction.

"Bravo, open fire! For all those fuckers did to us, for all they took away, let 'em have it! Let's take this city and this planet back, Marines!" I cried.

The Marines beside me, including Corporals Garian and Dandh, immediately obeyed my order. Loosing their weapons all at once, it didn't take long for the plasma in the air to be overwhelmed by lead. Sniper rifles were going off above me, and I could hear the _booms_ of Scorpion tank shells as they burst into the Covenant formation. Warthog gauss cannons and machine guns cracked and rattled, and it suddenly seemed like the whole world was coming to an end.

Eager to join the chaotic melee created when the aliens clashed with our lines, I jumped over the side of the city hall steps. I hit the ground running and started firing my assault rifle like mad; anything and everything that didn't look human was promptly bulldozed by my bullets. After taking down an onrushing group of a few Elites and Grunts, I dove behind a broken piece of statue and felt plasma boil over my head.

Well, there goes Doc's plan for me to go easy on my ribs, I thought.

I quickly peeked over my cover and squeezed the trigger of my MA5C, taking down more Covenant soldiers before my clip ran out. When I ducked back behind the statue, I found two Marines crouched on either side of me. And I couldn't help but grin.

"Dandh and Garian, you crazy-ass Marines came with me?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Corporal Garian replied.

"And just for the record, Lieutenant, no one's crazier than you!" Corporal Dandh remarked.

"But we'd still follow you anywhere, El-Tee!" Garian finished.

Despite the situation, my grin widened. "Well, boys, get ready for some fast action!"

After reloading, the three of us rose from our cover and let loose a constant stream of bullets. The two corporals were firing their submachine guns at the Covenant coming from the left and right, respectively; I was taking care of those in the middle. At first it was just your standard Covie infantry, but then things got a little more frightening. Six Brutes and four Hunters took an awful amount of interest in us.

"Run for it!" I shouted as the Hunters prepped their fuel rod cannons. The other two Marines and I managed to get away from the statue in time, but not quite far enough. The combined force of four fuel rod cannon beams utterly obliterated what was left of the statue, and a huge crater formed in its place. Meanwhile, us three Marines were thrown completely off our feet. We each landed on various parts of the grass surrounding the city hall building, and now we were all exposed to enemy fire.

"Find cover, now!" I yelled, trying to shake off the disorientation. I crawled under a hail of fire and found my rifle lying several feet ahead of me. Looking up for just a moment, I saw that Dandh and Garian were ok and had already reached cover. _At least they made it out_, I thought.

Just as tons of Brute spiker rounds were launched in my direction, a huge Scorpion tank and two Warthogs maneuvered into position in front of me.

Kaboom!

The Scorpion loosed a single cannon round at the Brutes and Hunters

that had been harassing Garian, Dandh, and I. Not only did the mammoth tank block rounds that had been meant for me, but it also eliminated about half the group of aliens with just one blast.

"Yeah! Thank you, tankers!" I cried into the general COM channel.

"No problem, Jarhead! You just get yourself to some cover, Lieutenant, and we'll handle 'em!"

Crawling faster through the grass, I finally made it to where the two corporals were hiding out. Looking down the street ahead, we could see the Scorpion and Warthogs take out the rest of the Brutes and Hunters. The two UNSC vehicles targeted two Ghosts next; the Warthogs' machine guns tore through the little Grunts manning the speedy alien crafts as if they were nothing more than tissue paper.

"First platoon, report!" I said into the COM, taking a second to check in with my company.

"It's amazing, El-Tee!" Lieutenant Hillburn replied. "Everywhere we shoot, there's a Covie bastard waiting to bite the dust! No casualties on our side, either!"

"Second platoon, status!"

"No casualties, Lieutenant! We're beating them back!" Second Lieutenant Frederick answered.

"Dean, give me the good news!"

"Cooper, we're in excellent shape! Those bloody aliens are going to think long and hard about staying on Sigma Octanus, that's for bloody sure!"

"Bravo Company, keep it up! We're getting them, Marines. Keep pushing them back until there aren't any left!"

Encouraged by the positive reports, I motioned for Dandh and Garian to follow me as we moved forward with Bravo and the ODSs. I could hardly believe my own eyes, even as I went through endless cycles of firing and reloading my rifle: the Covenant were actually being forced back! After weeks and weeks of being pounded mercilessly by these same aliens, Bravo Company, with considerable help from the 21st ODS Battalion, was finally getting its revenge.

This, I thought to myself, has definitely been a long time coming.

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The last battle in the month-and-a-half long fight for Sigma Octanus IV came to an end three hours later. At last, at long last, the Covenant had been defeated on the ground. As I watched the celebrations of the other Marines and ODSs, I couldn't feel anything for the moment but a gigantic sense of relief. The fight was over, and we had done it. We'd stopped the Covenant from getting whatever it was they'd wanted from Cote D'Azur, and we'd held our city.

The 21st ODSB Battalion managed to get into contact with Europa Base a short time later, where more good news came through: Sigma Octanus IV hadn't been completely glassed, as the media had first insisted. Actually, only about thirty percent of the planet's surface had been destroyed, and the rest of the UNSC ground forces had simply been out of contact with each other. But one thing remained true: Cote D'Azur had seemed to be the aliens' main focus. I wondered why briefly, but then decided that was a question better asked by the members of HighCom and ONI---you know, the bigwigs and all that. I was just happy that my company and I were still alive.

"Well, Lieutenant, I must say that was a helluva fight," Captain Schaeffer said to me once the battle had come to a close.

"Christ, sir. That's an understatement if I've ever heard one," I replied, grinning wide.

Schaeffer grinned back. "You're right, Cooper. You're totally fucking right." He folded his arms across his chest, then looked at me again. "You know, I don't think our battalion commander ever met you. How the hell did that happen?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, sir. I always thought you were commanding."

"No, I told you when we first arrived that I was the XO. Let me see if our CO's around here somewhereâ€¦" The captain turned around and waved at a Helljumper with silver hair. "Major Andreas, sir! Bravo Company's commander is here!"

Oh, shit! I thought. _That's the same major I chewed out over the radio! _He's_ the one who finally came to our aid? I'm so very, very dead._

"Cooper, so nice to finally meet you face to face," Major Dustin Andreas said as he approached.

I was utterly mortified. Now I really wished I hadn't taken my helmet offâ€¦

"Sir, I am so, so sorry for what I said earlier," I started, talking fast. I realized that Captain Schaeffer was looking at me with a half-curious, half-amused look on his face, but I didn't care. "I was completely out of line, sir, and I fully intend to accept the consequences of my---"

Major Andreas chuckled. "You really dug yourself a huge hole, Marine. That talk you gave me was so thoroughly an act of insubordination you left me stunned. But, I have to admit that if those had been my Marines' lives hanging in the balance, I would have done the same thing. So, I congratulate you, Captain Cooper, on your gutsy speech."

My jaw dropped. Had the major really just forgiven my actions?

"Sir, I'm really sorry. I mean, honestly, I'd never---"

That's when it hit me.

Major Andreas hadn't called me Lieutenant.

"Sir? All due respect, but I'm not Bravo Company's original commander, sir. I'm actually just first platoon's lieutenant. Which means I'm not a captain, sir." God, I'd never rambled this much in one conversation in my entire life. Why the hell was I doing it now? Frazzled nerves, that was it. All these weeks of constant combat had really gotten to meâ€|

"I know your rank, Cooper, because you explained the situation yourself earlier. And I also know what I said." The major exchanged glances with Captain Schaeffer, and the pair smiled.

"Congratulations, Captain Cooper," Schaeffer said. "You've been promoted, for all your actions here in Cote D'Azur."

"W-What?" I stuttered.

"You held the lines and your perimeter for weeks, even after your company commander and company executive officer had been killed, Cooper. I'd say with those kind of leadership skills, you deserve this honor," Major Andreas said.

"Oh, my God. Thank you, sir," I replied, beaming at Andreas. Then I turned to Schaeffer. "And thank you, too, sir."

The other captain grinned. "I'm not 'sir' to you anymore, Cooper. You can call me Schaeffer, and you can call me Henry. But you can't call me sir."

48. Chapter 47: Decorations and Demons

Author's Note: Thank you all so much for the reviews! And here's the second-to-last chapter everyone. Hope you enjoy, please be awesome and review, and peace!

Don't forget that the next chapter will be the finale! ;-)

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>Chapter Forty-Seven: Decorations and Demons**

1019 Hours, April 8, 2552. Europa Base, City of Cote D'Azur. "The Release," Planet Sigma Octanus IV. Twelve Days After the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV

Showered, fed, and rested, I walked down the hallway towards the room. Dressed in a fresh Class A dress uniform and sporting my two shiny new silver bars---the rank insignia of a captain in the UNSC Marine Corps---I was looking to kill some time before the formal services began.

Funerals were being held today for Captain Jeremy Kingston, First Lieutenant Tracey Graham, and the other sixteen Marines of Bravo Company who had lost their lives in the defense of Cote D'Azur. I'd tried to keep such depressing thoughts from my mind for the past few

days now, and for the most part it had worked. Everything has a way of catching up to you, however, and this morning I'd woken up with the thought of today's somber functions. Including the two top officers, eighteen Marines from Bravo Company had been killed in the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV, and nine of them had died after I'd taken over.

All this meant that my new company was down almost half of a platoon.

I took a deep breath and tried to get my brain to focus on something else. I knew I'd spend far too much time second-guessing my decisions during the battle when I was at the funeral, and I didn't want to start the emotional rollercoaster just yet. I'd held off for this long, and I figured I could wait a bit longer.

Immersed in my thoughts as I continued down the hall, I almost didn't notice when I passed by Petty Officer Second Class Michael Reynolds. He offered me a crisp salute as I strode past him, and it was the sudden movement out of the corner of my eye that finally made me stop. When I turned and saw who it was, I immediately smiled.

"Good morning, Captain," he said, flashing a smile of his own at me.

I returned his salute, and as the petty officer lowered his arm, I looked him up and down. His black hair looked like it had been recently cut, and his face was clean-shaven. After several days of good rest and sleep, the dark circles that had been under his eyes for weeks were gone now, too. Just like the rest of Bravo Company, the medic looked fresh and ready to take on the world again.

"Hey, Doc," I answered. "You're looking pretty sharp this morning, swabbie."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"So? What's the company status after all these days?" I asked him.

"Well, I spoke with the medics from second and third platoons yesterday, ma'am. Looks like about eighty percent of Bravo Company was wounded to some degree during the battle, Captain."

I nodded. Based on what I'd seen myself when I was going through the perimeter weeks ago, the statistics didn't really surprise me. "That's quite the chilling fact, Reynolds."

"Yes, ma'am. But you also have to consider that the vast majority were minor or treatable wounds, Captain," Doc Reynolds said. His blue eyes suddenly brightened as his lips curled into a smirk. "There's also the fact that a certain officer sustained rather significant wounds, but chose to ignore them."

"For good reason, Petty Officer."

"Of course, ma'am."

We grinned at each other.

"Heading towards the room, Captain?" Reynolds asked me.

"Actually, yeah. Have you used it yet?"

"I was just coming back from it. Sorry to tell you this, Captain, but I'm pretty sure you're gonna be one of the last to use it."

"I'm glad Bravo got their chance before me, Doc. They deserved it."

The medic's grin widened. "That's why we're happy to have you leading us, ma'am."

"Thanks, Doc," I said. "You know, I wouldn't even be here right now if it weren't for you, Reynolds. You patched me up like what, a million times?"

"More like three million, ma'am."

I chuckled, then grew more serious. "Well, I'll catch up with you later, Reynolds. I've got to use up my allotted time before the funerals begin."

"Of course, Captain," the medic said, saluting me once more. "By your leave, ma'am?"

"Carry on, Petty Officer," I said, returning the salute.

I parted ways with my friend, then kept striding down the hall. I'd finally gotten to the last door at the end, and I was reaching for the doorknob when First Lieutenant Dean Lewis walked out.

"Captain Cooper!" he said, saluting me as soon as he'd cleared the doorway.

I returned the salute, and after we'd dropped our arms, I said, "You know, Dean, I'm kind of starting to get sick of all this ritual."

Lieutenant Lewis grinned. "You'd better get used to it, ma'am. You're Bravo Company's official commander now, after all."

"Boy, do I know it," I said, grinning back. "I haven't even started on the pile of papers on my new desk."

"Then it's a bloody good thing you've got me as your XO to sort things out for you, isn't it?"

"Dean, you know I wouldn't want anyone else. You're one of my best friends, buddy."

"Likewise, Captain," he replied. He paused for a moment, then added, "You know, I rather miss the familiarity of calling you by your first name. But I want you to know that you deserve your promotion one hundred-ten percent, ma'am, and I couldn't be prouder to serve under you. The whole of Bravo thinks so, as well."

"Thanks, Dean. You have no idea how much that means to me."

"I can tell you it won't mean a bloody thing compared to what's in

that room, Captain."

I cocked an eyebrow at him. "What do you mean, Lewis?"

The lieutenant winked at me. "You'll just have to see for yourself, ma'am. I'll see you at the funerals, yes?"

"Yeah. Go ahead, Dean."

After another exchanging of salutes, I was left standing in front of the door. What could possibly be in that room that's so great? I wondered. Of course, there's only one way to find out—

I twisted the doorknob and entered.

A week ago, as things had been winding down after the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV had come to an end, some commanders at Europa Base chose to do something special for Bravo Company. They said they'd set up a secret room for us, and we were only allowed to go in one Marine at a time for a certain period. For the past seven days, I'd kept myself from using the room to give my Marines a chance; after all, they had fought hard and loyally, even under my unexpected leadership, for almost two long months. Now that most of them had had their turn, however, I'd decided that it was finally going to be mine. When I shut the door behind me, I looked over the small room.

Maybe I was too excited to tell, and perhaps my mind was playing dirty tricks on me. But, judging by the screen and the control panel at the desk, it looked to me like someone had converted this tiny office into a live video COM station. I could call home, with real-time picture and sound.

"No way," I breathed. I wanted to jump with joy, except that it probably would have caused my still-healing ribs to protest like crazy. I settled for sitting down at the chair by the desk instead. As I took my seat, I noticed that there were instructions and rules on the COM station's use: one call per Marine, lasting no longer than fifteen minutes.

Ok, so who do I call? Mom, or Will? I thought to myself. Mom, I finally decided, mostly because I still had no idea where Willis was stationed on Earth. Then she can let him know I'm not dead.

Despite how giddy I suddenly was, I typed the planetary code and local numbers into the COM station carefully. I didn't want to waste my one call on a wrong number. When I'd finished typing in the information, the black screen suddenly brightened to light gray as it flashed the words:

```
//PROCESSING REQUESTED DATA//
```

I could already tell this wait was going to kill me. Finally, after what seemed like ages, a prompt appeared on the screen:

```
//CONNECTION ESTABLISHED. PLEASE CONFIRM IDENTITY BEFORE  
CONTINUING//
```

Can't you just freaking patch me through?! I wanted to scream at it. Instead, I calmly typed in the information the COM station asked

for:

****Captain Natalie McKenzie Cooper, Commanding Officer Bravo Company, 102nd Force Action Battalion, 603rd Special Infantry Regiment, UNSC Marine Corps. UNSC Service Number 38221-50486-NC.****

There was a short pause before the words //IDENTITY CONFIRMED// flashed on the screen.

And suddenly, the dark letters on the light gray background resolved into a clear, live feed of my husband. He immediately did a double-take as soon as he saw it was me.

"N-Natalie?" he asked, incredulous.

"W-Will?" I croaked, surprised to see him.

He was the first to have his wits return. He gave me a huge grin as he cried, "It really is you! Natalie, you're alive! I can't believe this! I was so worried about you, Coop, and after all those media reports I went weeks thinking you were dead. God, am I glad to see you're ok!" He spoke in an excited rush, and then he finally stopped to squint at the screen. "Are those _captain's_ bars you're wearing, Cooper? Shit, I'd better start addressing you as ma'am now, huh?" he said with one of his goofy grins. "Congratulations, honey. Listen, I know you're probably wondering what I'm doing here at your mom's, and I'll explain later. But first, there's a little someone who wants to say hi."

Willis had talked so fast---and I'd been so stunned---that I hadn't even said a word yet, other than his name. And just as I opened my mouth to speak, I saw Gabriel run up to his father and crawl into his lap. As soon as my son saw me on the screen, he gave me a wide grin and said, "Hi, Mommy!"

I guess that's what finally did it for me.

Suddenly, everything that had happened---all the emotions I'd accumulated in the past several months, from the battle in the Heathan forest to the fighting in Cote D'Azur---everything just sort of caught up with me at the same time when I saw my little boy. In a few seconds, all these pent up emotions I'd trained myself to conceal began to come out as my eyes started to water. Despite my attempts at regaining control, it didn't take long for the silent tears streaming down my face to suddenly transform into loud and heaving sobs---sobs that made my entire body shudder and sobs that I absolutely could not control.

The gruesome battles of the Heathan forest and desert, the weeks of recovery and surgery in the hospital, the long and hard-fought battle for Cote D'Azurâ€|the shock of all those injured and dead civilians, the deaths of Private Beesner, Lieutenant Graham, Captain Kingston, and the other Marines of Bravo Companyâ€|the raw fear I'd experienced constantly in combat, the awful times I thought I was going to die, the painful wounds and close callsâ€|and now this final, happy sight of my family alive and wellâ€|

I cried for all of it.

49. Chapter 48: What Matters Most

Author's Note: Well everybody, the last chapter of the story is finally here. I spent a lot of time on this one, and I must have rewritten it a million times. Hope it turned out ok. ;-) Please please review. I'd really like to know how I did on this final chapter, and how I did on the story as a whole. As always, hope you enjoy and peace!

P.S. Thanks for reading, and be sure to go on to read the Closing Author's Note when you're done. ;-)

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>Chapter Forty-Eight: What Matters Most**

1945 Hours, July 7, 2552. Cooper Residence, St. Louis, MO. "The Great Homecoming," Planet Earth. **Three Months After the Battle of Sigma Octanus IV**

The Battle of Sigma Octanus IV had been a harrowing forty-day fight for the planet; the city of Cote D'Azur alone lay in a terrible state of ruin. After overseeing a clean-up operation that lasted over three months, however, I had been allowed to give Bravo Company a privilege coveted by all and granted to few: shore leave.

Ten _whole days_ of shore leave, to be precise.

I found it hard to believe at first, mostly because I could barely remember the last time I'd been allowed to go home. It didn't hit me while I was packing my bags, and it still felt like some amazing dream even when I was on my way to Earth. Ok, so I wasn't exactly going to my real home, Mars, but it was close enough. My family was on Earth, and that's what really mattered.

I'd debated whether or not to tell Willis about my arrival for the longest time. I'd wanted to surprise him, just to return the favor if nothing else. But if I stayed silent, there was a good chance I wouldn't be able to see him, and that was something I wasn't willing to risk. In the end, I'd told him before I left; he spoke to his commander and, thankfully, Captain Dakota had been sympathetic to the cause. The captain knew what Willis had gone through all those weeks thinking I was dead, and so he'd given my husband leave for as long as I was on Earth. Because of travel time, we'd ultimately get to spend seven days together.

And right now, an entire week with my family was just what I needed.

A lot of awful stuff had happened on Sigma Octanus IV, stuff that wasn't fit for anyone to see or experience. Just like Private Beesner's death, I needed to come to terms with everything that had occurred before I could truly move on. And, as always, there was only one person I knew who was capable of helping me do that.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking. We have touched down at terminal three of the New York spaceport. We hope you have had a pleasant flight from Cote D'Azur, and welcome to Earth,

everyone."

I wasn't sure what to expect when I walked onto the orbital platform. The last time I'd been on Earth wasâ€¦well, a long time ago, that was for sure. Besides, I had landed on a different spaceport back then. Where the hell did that flight attendant say the shuttle to the surface was? Crap, I knew I should have paid more attentionâ€¦

"Excuse me, ma'am, but are you Captain Natalie Cooper?" I heard behind me. Turning around, I found myself facing a man about a decade older than me.

"Depends," I said, cocking an eyebrow at him. "Who's asking?"

"Charles Harrington, ma'am. I'm a shuttle pilot for GalaCorp."

GalaCorp? I thought. _The most famous private orbit-to-surface shuttle company in UNSC space?_

"Sorry, but I think you got the wrong person. I didn't request a pick-up, Mr. Harrington. That would require me to fork over about four months of pay," I replied.

"I was hired by your husband, Mr. William Hawk, ma'am. He asked me to see you to the St. Louis airport."

For a moment, I just stood there and blinked at the man several times. Finally, my brain regained enough function that I was able to follow Harrington to his shuttle. After that, it was only about twenty minutes until he announced our arrival in St. Louis.

The GalaCorp man handed me my duffel bag, wished me a gracious farewell, and gave me what he thought was a salute; I was dressed in my uniform. I flashed an amused grin at the civvie and saluted him back properly, then stepped off the ramp. Walking out of the gate, I finally noticed the three people standing at the arrival area beyond: my mother, my husband, and my son.

When I saw them, I grinned so wide my face hurt.

"Mommy!" Gabe cried, starting to run towards me.

I dropped my duffel right where I stood and met my son halfway. He jumped into my arms as soon as I crouched to his level, and I quickly wrapped him in a tight hug. I must have kissed his light brown hair and small cheeks a million times; I hadn't seen my little boy for over a year, and holding him again was an indescribable feeling of pure happiness.

I didn't even bother to wipe away the tears of joy suddenly rolling down my face.

"I missed you so much, sweetie," I said. "I love you, my little Gabe, more than you'll ever know."

"Love you, Mommy," Gabriel replied, burying his face in my shoulder.

"You've definitely grown up a lot, kiddo." I couldn't believe he'd turned two years old almost a month ago. Time went by fast, even though it didn't seem that way sometimes.

I stood back up after a while, carrying my son in my arms. As Gabe clung onto my neck with his little hands, Willis approached and, not even bothering to speak first, gave me a hard kiss on the lips. Before he could say anything, I kissed him back with equal fervor.

"You have no idea how great it is to see you," my husband said in my ear as he hugged Gabe and I.

"You, too. And it's certainly great that we're finally all together, like we should be," I said. "Right, Gabriel?"

"Yeah!" he shouted, grinning wide. I could tell my son was excited to have both his parents with him at the same time. Unfortunately, such occasions were few and far between.

But thankfully, today was the exception to the rule.

"I was so scared for you, Natalie. For a long time, I thought you didn't make it," Willis said, his voice wavering slightly as he rested his forehead against mine.

"I know. I'm so sorry I made you worry, honey," I replied. "But I'm here now." I paused, taking in the moment; it still felt surreal to me that I was finally home, surrounded by my family. Then I said softly, "I love you, Will."

"I love you, too, Natalie." He kissed me a second time, and then he let me go so I could greet my mother.

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"I can't believe it. I didn't even notice those shiny new captain's bars of yours at the airport," Willis said when we were finally at my mother's house. I had changed out of my uniform and into civilian clothing since our arrival, but this was the first opportunity my husband had to comment about the promotion.

"Maybe you've been wearing civvies for too long," I said, trying hard to sound serious. Despite my efforts, that wasn't working out very well so far.

Willis, on the other hand, was able to keep a straight face as he looked down at his plain red T-shirt and khaki shorts. "Really? I've only had them on since this morning. You think that's too long?"

Damn, but things were moving way too slow right now. I finally gave him a smirk and got up close to his face. "Actually, I think any more time you spend with your clothes on is too long."

My husband gave me a brief look of mock indignation, barely able to conceal his grin. He wagged a finger at me and said, "Watch it,

Cooper. You're starting to cross into breaching-of-regs territory."

"You mean because I rank you now?"

"Exactly. And you know fraternizing with a subordinate comes at a hefty price."

"I might be willing to overlook the rules and regs, just this once."

Willis widened his grin, looking me in the eyes but still holding off on making a move. "You know, I'm starting to think your mom's emergency trip to the office was planned."

"Hmm. And I suppose Gabe fell asleep because he was an accomplice to the scheme?" I asked.

"Yup. The world's not-so-subtle way of giving us some much-needed alone time."

That's when things finally picked up.

A serious look suddenly appeared on his face after he spoke. Without warning, he slid his arms around my waist and leaned into me hard as my back hit the wall. I grabbed onto the back of his shirt tightly, closing my eyes for just a moment as I relished the feeling of his body against my own.

Our lips met unexpectedly just an instant later, and he gave me a long, passionate kiss. My head was spinning by the time it was over, and I could hear my pulse pounding in my ears.

"Fuck, Natalie, I really missed you," Willis whispered, sounding out of breath.

"I missed you, too, Will," I whispered back.

He kissed me again, this time with even more emotion than the first. By the time we found ourselves in front of the bedroom door, we were in the middle of some intense making out. Barely managing to even step through the threshold, Willis and I were already missing our shirts, lost somewhere in the frenzy of things. Once we were finally on the bed, everything else started coming off real fast. A powerful mixed wave of love and lust swept over us, and it lasted for the best twenty minutes of our lives.

Yeah, I was pretty damn happy I was still alive---and so was Willis.

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"Wow," I said a while later, taking a final deep breath of air. "I should _definitely_ make you worry more often."

Willis chuckled. "Nah. Just wait until the war's finally over, Coop," he replied, his breathing finally returning to normal as he lay beside me. "By my count, we have five years of this to catch up on. And that's only so far."

"You sure know how to motivate, don't you?"

"Well, it sure as hell couldn't hurt to give you one more reason to live for, Cooper."

I started laughing, and Willis turned his gaze on me before he joined in, too.

Our laughter died down eventually, and we didn't say anything else for a time. After a while, Willis moved closer and put his arm around my shoulders. I slid my own arm over his stomach before resting my head against his bare chest.

"There's a lot of stuff I have to talk to you about, you know," I said quietly. "The things I saw, the things I feltâ€¦everything. It was all such a damn mess..." I trailed off, unable to finish.

"I know, honey. The fighting must have been so horribleâ€¦"

I swallowed hard. "Butâ€¦let's put it off until my last day. I want to spend as much time with you and Gabriel---all three of us together---as I can before I go back. And I don't want to have to think aboutâ€¦about that battle."

Willis placed his hand over mine and gave it a squeeze. "Whenever you're ready, you know I'm here for you, Natalie."

I couldn't help but smile at him. "Yeah, I know. You've always been there for me, Will."

When I lifted my head and kissed him, it was meant to be a brief and innocent display of affection; I hadn't counted on all the love I felt for him to turn the quick peck into a deep kiss. Willis grinned at me when it was over and, not wasting any time on words, he promptly kissed me back. Soon after that, things got pretty far from innocent.

Lucky for me, there was one thing Willis was better at than being an ace pilot.

****THE END****

50. Closing Author's Note

****Closing Author's Note****

I was about halfway done with "The Battle of Sigma Octanus IV" before I decided to post it on this site. The whole story took me over a year to write, with a few months in between that I didn't work on it at all. The story-writing process has had its ups and downs, but it's certainly been an awesome ride. Plus it's the first story I've ever finished. Woohoo! (lol).

Anyway, I hope you had fun reading it, and I hope I provided you all with some halfway decent entertainment. Personally, I had a blast writing this and, yes, I'm toying with the idea of writing a sequel. I haven't convinced myself yet, but we'll see what happens.

As far as the ending goes, I hope you all liked it. I really wanted to make it a long finale, but as I wrote it, I discovered that everything fit better in a short chapter. I've also found that many stories nowadays have endings that are kind of depressing, and that's not what I wanted for mine. I wanted a happy end to a story that had both its tragedies and its good times. I hope I've accomplished that.

Thank you so much to all my loyal readers and, most of all, reviewers---this story would be absolutely nothing without you, so thank you all very much! ;-)

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><p>February 13, 2009 UPDATE:**

As of February 25, 2008, the sequel to this story is up! It's called "The Invasion of Earth", and you can find it through my profile page. Almost up to 40 chapters and nearing its conclusion. Check it out!

End
file.